

“Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”

These are the last words of Ruth in the entire book of Ruth. These are the words that define this woman.

Ruth is a model of selfless concern for others.

Ruth is the poster child of Jesus’ teaching: The greatest in the kingdom is the servant of all.

Ruth is the living model of the New Testament truth: The last shall be first.

Ruth is the personification of getting to the top by fighting your way to the bottom.

What appears to be a well planned romantic encounter, what appears to be two women manipulating a man to gain wealth, is in reality the answer to an anguished cry of bitterness to God.

The book of Ruth we have been reading is a powerful, powerful book. It explains so many things about how God works in our lives, and here today in Chapter 3 it reveals to us the blessings and the honor God will bestow upon a person who understands this spiritual truth: The last shall be first.

Ruth enters the land of Israel as a nonentity. She honestly has nothing going for her. She is a young widow who has lost everything. She is unable to have children and she is a Moabite, the on again, off again enemy of Israel.

Yet, in this story, Ruth is the hero.

Boaz might be the kinsman-redeemer, but Ruth is the hero.

The funny thing is, she is the last person we would think of as being a hero.

In addition, let me point out that though this book is called ‘Ruth’, it is not a story about Ruth, it really is a story about the redemption of Naomi. The book begins with Naomi and her loss; The book starts with the bitter reality that Naomi is now childless, and without hope for any more children. But, the last words spoken in the book are neighbors saying, “Naomi has a son.” The story begins and ends with Naomi - the redemption of a woman without hope.

Ruth is in no way, in this for herself. Ruth’s concern is for Naomi, she has no concern for herself. Pay close attention here, because Ruth becomes the hero by being last, by being a servant, and by setting concerns for herself...aside.

“Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.” These are the words Boaz uses as he heaps over 50 pounds of grain into the shawl of Ruth as a gift to Naomi; These are the last words of Ruth as she explains her encounter with Boaz to Naomi. Why is that?

What are some of the last bitter words of Naomi in Chapter 1? (verse 21) “I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty.” Through Ruth, God answers this call of bitterness with so much grain, as we saw in chapter 2, Naomi could open her own grain warehouse. Remember, Boaz has set things up so that Ruth will have brought home over 1500 pounds of grain by the end of the harvest - the equivalent of the wages of 30 workers.

Naomi has cried out to God that she is empty. When she said those words “the Lord has brought me back empty” were those words a prayer, or was she just complaining?

I don’t think it matters. God is with us at all times. He hears everything we say. He knows everything we think and even more he knows the depth of the meaning of what we say and what we think in our hearts. Does God pay more attention to empty prayers or does God pay more attention to true expressions of sorrow and grief? Well, I’ll tell you what happened here, God heard the heartfelt cry of Naomi, and God had already begun to answer her cry, with the person of Ruth.

God starts to answer Naomi’s cry of grief before she expresses it.

When I pray a prayer, when I cry out to God, how long do I have to wait for the answer?

Has this happened to you? You have a situation, whatever it is, and you call out to God for help, for wisdom, for direction....finally for anything to happen. Nothing. You pray and pray. Nothing. It is so frustrating. When is God going to answer? You know what, God already started to answer your prayer before you prayed it. Before the thought even came to your mind, God set in motion - The powerful answer. The answer to Naomi’s cry sits in front of her everyday at breakfast. The answer to Naomi’s cry has been with her, watching over her, way before Naomi cries out that she is empty.

Ruth has been very good to Naomi, Ruth has stood by Naomi and has been the sole breadwinner in the family. Naomi - feels that she must get a permanent home for Ruth, after all she is getting up in her years, and this is what she said should happen for Ruth in

the first chapter. Remember it is the girl's mother who found a husband in those days, so we see Naomi taking on the role of Ruth's mother. This shows how close they have become and I hate to say it, this is how close they have become as a result of their shared tragedies. Now, Naomi doesn't appear to understand that Ruth is a hero. Naomi thinks that Ruth is a great daughter-in-law and Naomi wants Ruth to be happy, but Naomi doesn't see that Ruth is a hero.

So your in last place, bottom of the barrel, the end of the line. You a hero? Good luck! Isn't a hero powerful? Isn't a hero in command? Isn't a hero able to do things no one else can?

Some think so. But, not God. Why? Because God is a God of redemption. In the plan of God, the first become last, and the last become first. Those who seek power will be tainted, those who set aside personal concern, will be honored.

So Naomi comes up with a scheme to win Ruth a husband. Notice that Naomi knows everyone in town, and everyone in town knows Naomi. Without a doubt Naomi knows who is the closest kinsman-redeemer, (If it were me, my brother would be the closet kin) I mean she knows everyone, but still Naomi sends Ruth to Boaz - knowing Boaz is not the closest kinsman-redeemer.

Look, Ruth is a free woman. She can go back to Moab and marry anyone she wants to. Even Boaz alludes to this when he says that Ruth could have gone after younger men (verse 10). See, even though Naomi says Boaz is a kinsman-redeemer, he is not THE kinsman-redeemer. Truth is, Ruth can marry anyone she wants to and since Boaz has proven to be such a generous man, it is clear to Naomi that Boaz will make a good husband. Look, in verse 2 the Hebrew word for relative is a clever word play on the Hebrew word friend. It reveals that Boaz is more of a friend than a relative, more of a friend than the next in line kinsman-redeemer.

Naomi sends Ruth out to get a husband, but Ruth, who clearly understands the spiritual principle, 'The last shall be first' has other plans....

In those days threshing was accomplished with the grain being thrown down on a hard surface and then a wooden sledge with stone embedded teeth was dragged over the grain to break the outer hull and separate the husks from the kernels. The resulting mixture was then winnowed, thrown into the air during a light wind - the lighter husks would float

away while the grain kernels would fall back to the ground. If the wind was too strong the grain would fly away with the husks, and if it was too light, nothing would separate. The reason Naomi knows that Boaz will be at the threshing floor is because the wind was just right for winnowing the grain.

In verse 3 we see Ruth getting herself ready, and we need to particularly note that the use of the cologne on an occasion such as this, was a symbol of a good reputation. The indication here is that Ruth dresses up in her best clothes, which would mean that she was very well covered, including a large mantle and a large head covering. She is in no way dressing seductively. Only her face would most likely be exposed, Ruth is dressed for a formal occasion, very tastefully done - she is dressing for the equivalent of a black tie event. What we see is a high class woman who has integrity - and she is going to make sure it remains that way.

Naomi tells Ruth to not let Boaz know she is there and to wait until Boaz had retired for the night. There would be others at the threshing floor and Naomi wants Ruth to be sure to be able to talk with Boaz in confidence - away from ear shot of other people. She is to watch and see where Boaz lies down - Ruth certainly doesn't want to approach the wrong man.

Naomi also tells Ruth lie down next to Boaz and to uncover his feet. Over the years some have taken this to be a highly charged sexual euphemism, they claim that Ruth was uncovering more than a pair of feet. But the word for feet in the Hebrew used here, is only seen elsewhere in Dan 10:6 where it means, you guessed it, "Feet". So, the text says what it means here, Ruth uncovered the feet of Boaz, not his knees, not his waist, not his chest - his feet. Now clearly we see that the overtones are of a romantic nature - but be careful in reading into the story some Hollywood style encounter, things like we see in Hollywood films, just didn't happen in ancient Israeli culture.

What does it mean for Ruth to uncover the feet of Boaz? Well, as a practical matter, the night air would cool to the point where Boaz would wake up and recover himself. So it serves as a way to wake up Boaz without embarrassing Ruth with any gestures that might be taken as a sexual advance. In addition it is an obtuse cultural signal to Boaz that Ruth is, beyond any doubt, interested in Boaz.

Naomi believed that Boaz would not take advantage of the situation and would react as an honorable man. Apparently Naomi sees that Boaz would be interested in Ruth, but

realizes that Boaz would see it as an absurd that a younger woman would have any interest in him whatsoever. (Remember Boaz is much closer in age to Naomi than he is to Ruth. So Naomi finds a way to break the impasse. This was risky. This was daring. In those days, only a man would breach the subject of marriage, only a man would propose marriage, but here, these two woman, take a chance, the men after all, don't seem to get the situation at hand. Big surprise.

See, Naomi sends Ruth in on a secret mission, so as not to embarrass Boaz with a proposal of marriage. There are a great many risks here, their reputations are at risk; They could offend Boaz and maybe lose a friend and by extension lose everything they have gained. If Ruth is seen at the threshing floor, all manner of assumptions could be made, especially since she is from the country of Moab, an assumption could even be made of attempted prostitution.

Notice here in verse five that once again we see Ruth devoted to Naomi, we see Ruth setting aside her personal concerns - she does as Naomi asks. I think on a quick reading we can assume that Ruth is trying to get Boaz as a husband so that she will be potentially happy. But did you notice, it is Naomi's suggestion, it is Naomi's initiative, it is Naomi's plan? Ruth isn't doing this for herself, she is doing this for Naomi. Ruth knows that if she marries Boaz, Boaz will be required to take care of Naomi as well.

If you think Boaz is the hero in this book - think again. Ruth is an archetype for us to follow, she is a classic example of the last shall be first, she is a classic example of becoming great by serving others, she is a classic example of getting to the top of the ladder by working your way to the bottom of the ladder. If there is any hero in these pages today it is, without a doubt Ruth.

Do human plans coincide with God's plans? You bet they do.

Do not read into verse 7 that Boaz is drunk. Ruth is not taking advantage of a man under the influence of too much wine. That is not what the Hebrew says here, instead it indicates that Boaz was exhausted from the day and was very ready to get some sleep, not that he was drunk.

There are probably several others bedding down for the night as well. Ruth goes in and uncovers his feet. Then she lays down, fairly apparently perpendicular to Boaz. We know this because the Hebrew clearly indicates that she is located at his feet in particular.

People have tried to read into this text that Ruth snuggles up to Boaz, but, I afraid it says nothing of the sort. She uncovers his feet, lays at his feet and waits for the inevitable shock of cold to set in. Boaz wakes with a start, and realizes someone is at his feet, who he does not know. Ruth identifies herself and says “spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.”

To spread the corner of your garment over your maidservant is a Hebrew idiom to marry - and nothing more. Ruth proposes marriage here. The language here does not indicate any kind of hanky panky, to say so, is to place your modern day worldview upon the story. The thought behind the idiom is that when one covers the woman it shows purity between the two, while to uncover would indicate adultery. So we see the Hebrew text going to great lengths to show that these two are honorable people. The Hebrew text goes to great lengths to show no hanky panky has taken place.

Ruth clearly assumes that Boaz has a duty to marry her, calling him her kinsman-redeemer. A kinsman redeemer was a close relative who was obligated to marry the widow of a relative and then produce an heir in the name of the deceased man. Ruth has departed from Naomi's instructions. She was to wait for Boaz to come up with the idea. But, instead Ruth proposes the idea, with a twist. Naomi sends Ruth in for a husband, Ruth instead suggests husband and kinsman-redeemer, this way Naomi will not only have a home, but also an heir. Notice what she does is all for the benefit of Naomi. How do we know this? Ruth is a Moabite, the potential offspring is not for her name to continue, but for Naomi's family name to continue.

Naomi simply wants to find a husband for Ruth. But Ruth subordinates her own happiness to the family duty of providing an heir. This is why we see Boaz's specific response in verse 10. Far from being offended, Boaz is pleased. The greater kindness Boaz refers to is the fact that Ruth is willing to provide an heir, she is willing to marry to fulfill a family obligation out of her own free will instead of finding a husband to meet her own desires. Remember, she is free to find and marry and man she wants to. Boaz highlights this by saying that she could have found a younger man, but she places family obligation first, in other words, she places Naomi before herself.

Ruth acts neither from passion nor greed. Rather, she sacrificially sets aside personal preferences, and chooses to marry because of family. She reckons her own happiness as secondary. There is no mention of love here, but that doesn't mean love is absent, that doesn't mean that love will not happen, that doesn't mean that these two are not

interested in each other. But, what we do see is that, for Ruth, this situation is more about Naomi than herself. For Ruth the situation is primarily about Naomi than anything else. Boaz specifically grants her request - in effect he grants Naomi's Scheme - which he obviously has figured out has come from Naomi - how else would Ruth know of this? Boaz knows that he is not the next in line, and he knows that Naomi knows that he is not the next in line. He is taken back that they approached him first, but he is taken back even more by Ruth's offer not just for marriage, but her offer to have a child in the name of Naomi. A child that everyone would call Naomi's child, not Ruth's child. Boaz recognizes this and sends Ruth back with large a gift for Naomi.

Do you see this? Naomi thinks Ruth is going for a husband, but no, Ruth sets herself aside, she is giving Naomi a child. The act of a hero, selfless, servant like - she is fighting her way to the bottom.

Why does he grant her request? Because of her "noble character." The city had judged her of noble character - a big thing for a moabite. You can be assured they held her to a much higher standard. In fact, her reputation is what earns her status as Boaz's peer, her reputation is what earns her the chance in even approaching the subject of marriage. Ruth's reputation had neutralized any objections to her in marriage to an Israelite.

In verse 12 we see that wedding bells seem to be ready - but there is a catch - Boaz is not the next inline and as such he cannot act as the kinsman-redeemer.

This whole situation is now out of the hands of Ruth, she places it in the hands of Boaz, as Naomi placed it in her hands, and now she waits. All they do is wait. The answer to their dilemma was at their finger tips, the end was at hand, but again it is elusive. They must wait again. What is it with God and waiting?

You know what? Ruth has failed. She was sent to secure a husband, and she failed. She has no husband, she has no engagement - just a promise....and six measures of grain - six promises of redemption for a life that once held absolutely no hope. In Judaism the six measures given to Ruth symbolize the six great descendants that would come from Ruth including David and the Messiah - who we know, is Jesus.

So....the last, is on her way to becoming the first.

The outsider, in fact, the former enemy, is on her way to becoming the ultimate insider.

The once desperate woman who had nothing more to offer than her company, is on her way to becoming a hero.

And the woman who cried out to God when all she has was emptiness is about to be given the impossible.

More importantly, the same God is about to fully and irrevocably redeem two lives that once had no hope - stands ready to do the same for you.