

Ruth 3 (PM)

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[0 : 00] So, marriage proposals are kind of interesting, right? People put a lot of effort into them. You know, we want them to be heartwarming and lovely with quirky personal elements.

There are elaborate cover stories to get the proposer into position for that perfect moment. You can now apparently hire professionals to contract the whole thing out, to make sure everything is picture perfect.

I learned this on MarthaStewart.com. Now, one thing I've noticed about marriage proposals on the gram, which is what cool people these days are calling Instagram.

You heard it here first. One thing I've noticed is there's a lot of self-absorption in the marriage proposals you see there. And when people get married these days, there's a lot of talk about personal happiness and self-satisfaction.

How thrilled the couple is they finally found their soulmate. Ruth 3 gives us a very different marriage proposal. Not only is there no videographer to record the moment, but the people involved are doing it not for themselves, but for the sake of others, in a remarkable act of submission.

[1 : 15] Let's back up for a moment and go big picture. So we're at our third stop in the book of Ruth. Our story opened two weeks ago in Ruth 1, with empty stomachs and then death and bitterness and uncertainty.

Ruth and Naomi have learned the tough lesson that life can be unbelievably painful. Disaster can strike at any moment. Despite their best efforts, they find themselves on the margins of society. Last week, we saw in Ruth an incredible act of bravery as she goes to glean leftovers from the barley harvest. The chance of assault or worse was very high, especially in the days of the judges. Boaz provided for Ruth and Naomi well beyond the laws at the time.

And that brings us to chapter 3, the famous midnight betrothal scene on the threshing floor. The heart of this chapter, obviously, the heart of the whole book of Ruth is love.

[2 : 31] And love, God's love, covenantal hesed love, is the power of God at work in the universe. In chapter 3, we get an exciting glimpse of life-giving hesed love.

And one of the most captivating and masterful aspects of this short little book is the way in which God's love and the straightforward earthiness of human love intersect.

But it doesn't look like a rom-com, does it? Let's consider Ruth for a second. Ruth is many things. I find her absolutely fascinating. She would be a neat woman to know. One thing we learn about Ruth in this chapter comes from Boaz.

Ruth is, verse 11, a worthy woman. In Hebrew, the exact same phrase used for the superwoman we meet in Proverbs 31. that inspiring and impossibly industrious and clever and kind and nurturing woman.

[3 : 49] Boaz is saying to her, you are a catch. And interestingly enough, when Boaz is introduced in chapter 2, he's given the same title.

We read 2, verse 1, Naomi had relatives of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. Boaz. And that phrase is a good indication Ruth and Boaz have hearts for the Lord, have good character.

They are a good match. And Boaz significantly, as he tells her, or confirms for Ruth, is a redeemer. So what is a redeemer? Let's unpack that for just a second. Now when Israel moved into the land that was promised to them, it was divided up by the tribes. And then the tribes were divided up by clans, and then the clans were divided up by families.

So every family had land that was given to them as a gift from God. It was theirs in perpetuity. And if you fell on hard times, and had to sell that land, or have someone else work that land, you were in effect cut off from one of God's promises, and it fell to your extended family to bring you back and

restore you.

[5 : 05] So the redeemer, someone close to the family, usually someone wealthy, could be called upon to buy the land back so that the original owner could once again use it.

Boaz is a redeemer. This couple is a good match. But given how industrious, and tenacious, and faithful Ruth is, what really strikes me most about this chapter is that she suddenly seems very passive.

Naomi gives Ruth a plan, and Ruth responds, all that you say I will do. She asks Boaz to marry her, and must wait for his decision.

After he agrees to marry her, she follows his instructions exactly, and tactfully spends the night. And then when Ruth returns from the threshing floor back to her mother-in-law, she must wait for the resolution of the matter, with no further role to play until the elders have finished talking.

And the more I thought about all these details, the more I wondered, is this what Ruth actually wants? What's going on inside her heart?

[6 : 26] Does Ruth love Boaz? Or is she simply a pawn in a larger game? And then the more I thought about it, the more I realized, we don't know the internal motivation of any of the characters in this story.

Is Naomi being manipulative, using the beautiful young Ruth to seduce the older Boaz, so that he will redeem the land? Or is she being kind?

Has Boaz been generous because he cares for Ruth and Naomi? Or is he just a lecherous old man taking advantage of his wealth and biding his time? In truth, there are mixed motives in all of our hearts.

Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz are not our moral exemplars, even if they might be very helpful examples. And because we are not directly told what to think about what they are doing, because the Bible often shows rather than tells, and because of the climate we live in today, I think it's very easy to be suspicious.

And I think I was aware of this suspicion, started to ruminate on this suspicion, because loving submission is something our culture understands less and less.

[7 : 49] It is not something our hearts are naturally inclined to do. We tend to see everything in terms of power. Who has it? Who doesn't?

What to do about it? And the idea that you would set aside your immediate happiness to care for someone else, to put another's needs before your own, for the sake of a higher good, is positively foreign.

And almost inconceivable. And yet we know this story is about the purposes of God in the world. We know his hesed, his steadfast, covenantal love, is what gives shape and purpose to our lives, to the lives of Naomi and Ruth and Boaz.

us. Though the Lord never steps forward in this book, his presence is everywhere through acts of love.

[8 : 55] Though he never speaks, his name is constantly on the lips of his people. And that brings us back to Ruth's apparent passivity, which in truth is an act of love.

As Boaz himself says in verse 10, May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter, you have made this kindness, hesed, greater than the first, that you have not gone after younger men, whether poor or rich.

Because Ruth loved her mother-in-law, she left the land she grew up in. Because she loves her mother-in-law and Boaz, she submits to this proposal.

In Ruth 3, we have a startling, remarkable example of loving submission. And it was unbelievably risky.

I mean, can you imagine as a poor single mother saying to your daughter, go shower, put on some perfume, a nice coat, and that nice older man who's been looking after us ask him at midnight, will he marry you?

[10 : 08] It's crazy. But putting it as bluntly as that doesn't mean Ruth is miserable in this situation either. It means simply she is seeking to submit. But not just to anyone.

Ruth is submitting to her God. Now what do I mean by that exactly? In Ruth 1, when Naomi is urging Ruth and Orpah to go back to their families, Ruth takes a vow.

Janelle just referred to it. With the kids talk, she says, do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my

people and your God my God.

Though an outsider and a Moabite nonetheless, Ruth is committing herself to serving the Lord, committing to love his people, specifically in her mother-in-law.

Boaz, hearing the story secondhand, blesses Naomi with these words in chapter 2, verse 12. The Lord repay you for what you have done and a full reward be given to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

[11 : 26] And so we learn that by coming with Naomi and loving her and casting her lot with Israel, Ruth has, in fact, sought refuge under the wings of Yahweh.

But Ruth has not yet been incorporated into the people of God, as friendly as Boaz and his workers have been. And Naomi, though she has returned, is not restored to her family's inheritance. Her land belongs to another man at the moment. Someone, a redeemer, needs to buy it back. So when Ruth comes to Boaz in the middle of the night and says, spread your wings over me, for you are a redeemer, we know what she's asking for.

As attentive readers, we know Ruth is asking for Boaz to play a role in fulfilling his own prayer for Ruth. The wings of Boaz's cloak are one of the ways in which the Lord covers Ruth with his wings. and this potential marriage is actually part of God's purpose to care for all three of them. And the real beauty of this clandestine marriage proposal is that each of the people, not just Ruth, are putting the needs of the other first, which is so contrary to our natural relationships.

[12 : 58] If Naomi just wanted her land back, she could have chosen the safe route and approached the unnamed redeemer that we learn about through Boaz. But she wanted to find rest for her daughter-in-law, as she says in verse 1, which is to say a good man who could take care of her.

So she tries to draw Boaz out with this bold and risky plan. If Ruth just wanted to belong to Israel through marriage, she could have gone after one of the exciting younger men.

As Boaz acknowledges in his own speech, worthy man that he is, he is no spring chicken. Boaz, if he just wanted to get married to Ruth, he could have easily approached Naomi and used his tremendous wealth and influence to tilt the situation in his favor.

They were already eating out of his hand. But knowing he was older, assuming Ruth would want to be with a younger man, he steps aside and doesn't take advantage of these widowers who have fallen on hard times.

Everyone, in their own way, sets aside their immediate desires and puts another first. And God, in his love, draws them all together.

[14 : 21] Quite lovely, isn't it? But the conclusion of the entire affair doesn't come until next week, which is so appropriate, because what do we want from this bold and pious proposal?

The question on everyone's mind? Did they do it? We want consummation. We've got this lovely young woman, Ruth, this upstanding, generous fellow, Boaz.

He's got a belly full of wine and good food. She's bathed and is wearing perfume. They're really into each other. They've bared their hearts. They're seeking God's will. The sensual smell of freshly threshed grain is right there.

But consummation is precisely what we are not given, because Ruth and Boaz and Naomi must now submit to the will of the community, under the law of the Lord, to determine what the proper course of action for these three will be.

The marriage, if it is to go forward, is going to be not just for Ruth and Boaz's blessing, though it is for them, but also to bless Naomi, and not just to bless Ruth and Boaz and Naomi, but the town of Bethlehem.

[15 : 39] And if we read further into the story, this marriage, in fact, is not just for Ruth and Boaz and Naomi and Bethlehem, but for the world. And if we read Ruth's son will be Jesse, Jesse's son will be David, and out of David's line will come Jesus of Nazareth, our Redeemer and Lord, the Savior of the world.

The purposes of love always flow outwards. And here in Ruth 3, in the dark, with beating hearts and whispered words and hope for possibilities, we catch a particular and wonderful glimpse of what love means for a man and a woman.

There's an interesting connection in the Hebrew Bible here with Ruth as well. I mentioned earlier that Ruth shares the same title as the worthy woman of Proverbs 31.

which is a book that comes right before Ruth in the Hebrew Bible. So you read about this worthy woman and then you get the story of Ruth. But immediately after the book of Ruth, any guesses? The Song of Songs. Marriage can be a beautiful thing.

[17 : 13] but it is not an end in and of itself. It blesses and for many marriage opens up the possibility of a unique intimate love that they will not find anywhere else.

Marriage is a good thing, but it is not given for our personal satisfaction. Marriage is given for the glory of God and marriage or indeed any relationship of intimacy, of love, will only be truly loving if the love of God is at the heart of it all.

And that is a positively impossible thing to do. Were it not for Christ to come to us, to show us what it means to love, to fully empty himself, to invite us into that love, so that we could go out and live the reality of that love.

love. Now, last year, my wife and I thought, we should probably take the alpha marriage course. It's been a couple of years that we've been married. We thought, pretty good, but, you know, not perfect. And the first one is kind of, you know, just to get you your toes wet.

[18 : 50] The second day, the second video, was on communication. And man did it open up a can of worms. You could see the feathers getting ruffled.

We were hot under the collar. We were actually getting angry, and I grew up in a family that hates to fight, but we were fighting. And then came this question in the middle of all of it.

Acknowledging that there was wounding and hurt. In this moment, what can you do to serve your partner? And my wife said at the time, and then again afterwards, when we were talking about this, it was the most infuriating question.

Because when you've been wounded, when you're angry, why on earth do you put someone else first? And yet, this is the very dynamic of God's love.

At the heart of the book of Ruth is God's love. This love is patient, it's kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, it does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs, does not delight in evil, but rejoices with truth, it always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

[20 : 28] This love never fails. Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us love. May God be the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen.