

Ruth | Love in a Hopeless Place (Ruth 3)

December 5, 2021 | Matthew McNutt

[Title Slide] The book of Ruth is perhaps one of my favorite books in scripture. In 1320, Dante Alighieri wrote in the *Divine Comedy* that Ruth was “the gleaner-made, meek ancestress of David the psalmist.”¹ Dante was simply defining Ruth the way many have; a simple, meek, quiet woman that liked to pose for paintings in fields of wheat. But Ruth is not some romantic Disney fairy tale. This book is so much more than where our westernized assumptions often lead us. Yes, it is a love story – but it is a story of love far deeper and greater than anything we see in the movies today. And like Rhianna’s song, we find love in a hopeless place.

Ruth was written 3000 years ago,² in a time where women were treated as possessions and had no voice. This story stood out so much so that we now have a book of the Bible named after a foreign woman. Let that sink in. In fact, this story is so impactful, it is read publicly every year in Jewish synagogues during the feast of Weeks.³ Ruth was not meek. She was a woman who was assertive, who took the lead, and in a culture where women were treated like property, she stood out as a woman who was listened to and followed – despite her gender, her ethnicity, and her place at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Ruth is a story of love, but not sappy love. It is a beautifully written exploration of **chessed**, an ancient Hebrew word that describes “kindness, graciousness, and loyalty that goes beyond the call of duty.”⁴ Another way to say it? Loving kindness.

Chapter one records Naomi’s *chessed*, her loving kindness to Ruth and Orpah when she told them to return to their families. It also records Ruth’s *chessed* to Naomi when she stayed with her and chose the harder path. Ruth tells Naomi,

“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” (Ruth 1:16b-17, NIV)

Chapter two details more **chessed**; first in Ruth’s initiative in stepping out to glean, but also in her bold requests to Boaz. As a reminder, gleaning was the way in which ancient societies provided for those in need. There was a law that said farmers were not supposed to harvest the corners of their crops, and if they dropped some of the harvest accidentally, they were to leave it behind, so that those in need could pick it up.⁵ This was called gleaning. It was hard work, and typically it took a full day of gleaning to get a single day’s worth of food for a person. Ruth was hoping to somehow glean enough for two people – which is why she broke numerous cultural expectations; she spoke up – as a woman, that was unusual. More shocking? She asked to be among the harvesters, picking up the grain with the workers bundling it rather than following behind finding the leftovers.⁶ Ruth was showing loving kindness to Naomi, boldly risking being expelled from the field in an effort to make sure she could get enough food for Naomi and herself.

¹ Alice L. Laffey and Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, *Ruth (Wisdom Commentary)* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), xlili.

² *NIV Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 1215.

³ Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Women’s Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 143.

⁴ Frederic William Bush, *Ruth-Esther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 42.

⁵ James McKeown, *Ruth (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 39.

⁶ Carolyn Custis James, *The Gospel of Ruth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011) 101.

Boaz's response was equally shocking and demonstrated *chessed* as well.⁷ He allowed it! The law was to let people glean, but the spirit of the law was to make sure those in need could eat. Boaz chose to live out the spirit of the law. He displayed this *chessed*, this loving kindness, to Ruth, for a noble reason: because he was impressed with her character. He admired her for her sacrifices for Naomi.⁸ Her loving kindness challenged him to display loving kindness as well. He said to Ruth,

“May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” (Ruth 2:12, NIV) Spoiler alert; his prayer for her to be protected by God comes back to him in today's passage – but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The second chapter ends with Naomi's observation that Boaz was their “guardian-redeemer.” A what? We'll get to that in a few minutes, but here's what I will say: it's a note of hope.

And then time passes. Months go by. Ruth works her way through the barley harvest. Then the wheat harvest. And then it was summer. Naomi has begun to transform from the devastated woman in chapter one to someone who is ready to face the world again. And the timing is critical; harvest seasons are over and there is no where to glean. After so many months of Ruth caring for her, Naomi decides it's time for her to be proactive in helping Ruth find a husband. More specifically, she wants Boaz to marry Ruth. Which is not surprising to us, right? Many of us already know the end of the story, so it makes sense. And the author of Ruth, whoever it is, is planting hints at this direction, and showing the ways in which God was orchestrating the stories of these different people to collide together.

But here's the thing, no one would have matched Ruth with Boaz. He was wealthy and influential, a man in his mid-forties.⁹ Ruth was young, probably in her early to mid-twenties. She was poor, a foreigner from an enemy nation, forbidden to participate in the normal gatherings of God's people.¹⁰ Not only that, there would have been rumors that she must be barren – after all, she had been married to Mahlon for years and not produced any children for him before he died.¹¹

A couple days ago, Heather and I took our son Caleb to our alma mater, Gordon College, in Wenham, Massachusetts. This is the Gregory Auditorium, where on August 28th, 1996, the first day of classes our freshmen year, Heather and I ended up sitting next to each other. I immediately was interested. She thought I was weird. And we became friends, hanging out for the next few years until something changed our senior year. People always ask each other how they met; we value romance and exciting connections. That's not how marriage worked during Ruth's time. It was arranged. One commentator, describing the unlikely pairing of Ruth and Boaz wrote, **“Marriages were strategic opportunities for families to forge political and social ties with other families to strengthen their standing in the community.”**¹²

She was a woman who was socially unacceptable for Boaz on every level – it wouldn't have even occurred to people as a possibility. The fairy tale stories we love, like Snow White meeting a Prince

⁷ Ibid, 102-103.

⁸ James, *The Gospel of Ruth*, 103.

⁹ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, *Ruth (Wisdom Commentary)*, 70.

¹⁰ Sandra Glahn, *Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2017), Kindle location 1227.

¹¹ James, *The Gospel of Ruth*, 100.

¹² Ibid, 99.

Charming and being swept out of poverty into a palace would not be written until thousands of years later.¹³ **Talk about Love in a Hopeless Place!**

And yet, Naomi, emerging from her grief and the months of care from Ruth, has an idea.

Ruth 3:1-4 (NIV) ¹“One day Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi said to her, “My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. ² Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³ Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

Okay. Let’s talk about this. The bath, perfume, nicest clothes? This was how a bride got ready for a wedding.¹⁴ In today’s language, Naomi told Ruth to get something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, put on a white dress, get a veil, and head over to Boaz.

It reminds me of a moment from the show Friends; Rachael’s boyfriend Joshua had just broken up with her because he was uncomfortable with Rachael seeming too serious, too fast. When the other friends comforted her, this happened:

[Show Friends clip / photo]

Here’s the thing, there is no way to get around what’s going on when someone shows up in wedding clothes. [Slide with Ruth 3:3-4] Naomi was telling Ruth to look like a bride, lay down at his feet, and do not talk. Let Boaz do the math and pick up on the not too subtle hint.

Now, some have understood this phrase, “uncover his feet,” as code for something sexual. And to be honest, the ancient Hebrew does have that double meaning.¹⁵ It could be innuendo, referring to another body part. It also could just refer to feet. I don’t believe there is a hidden meaning here. Boaz later will praise Ruth’s virtue, and Boaz is celebrated as a man of integrity. In this moment this is important because, spoiler alert, he’s going to mention that there is another man who has the first right to marry Ruth. I find it difficult to believe that Boaz, knowing about this other man, would sleep with her, then say, “I have to let him have first dibs on marrying you before I can,” and be celebrated as an honorable man in scripture.

Back to the story! Ruth agrees to the plan, goes to the threshing floor that night, quietly uncovers Boaz’s feet, and lays down by them. Boaz feels the cold air on his feet, or senses a presence, wakes up, and Ruth immediately deviates from Naomi’s plan:

Ruth 3:8-9 (NIV) ⁸ In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet! ⁹ “Who are you?” he asked. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

Ruth chooses a proactive route. She tells Boaz exactly what she wants. And she uses his prayer to do so. Months before, in *Ruth 2:12 (NIV)*, he had said, “**May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.**” In 3:9, what is translated garment, actually reads “wing” in the original

¹³ <https://www.blackpoolgrand.co.uk/history-of-snow-white>

¹⁴ Glahn, *Vindicating the Vixens*, Kindle location 1433.

¹⁵ Newsom, Ringe, and Lapsley, *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 147.

Hebrew.¹⁶ It was a way of asking to be a part of his household,¹⁷ in the same language he had prayed on her behalf.

Has anyone else thought it was weird that it keeps coming up that Boaz is a relative of Ruth's dead father-in-law? When someone dies, we don't typically say to the surviving spouse, "so, did he have any cute brothers or uncles you could make a move on?"

In ancient times, it was all about the man. Women didn't own land, they didn't have a say in town politics, they weren't even allowed to be witnesses in hearings, and if a man died without a male heir, his family name would disappear and his land would go with it, leaving the widow in the most vulnerable of positions, often with no prospects other than to sell herself. So a practice came to be. If a man died without a son, the closest male relative – typically a brother - would marry his widow and have a son in his name to carry on the family, inherit the family land, and take care of the widow. That was called being the "guardian-redeemer." Here's the thing; being a guardian-redeemer was a costly endeavor. It meant spending money on property and family that would take away from your own family's inheritance. And doing so for a Moabite woman? No.

This could have gone really badly. A woman essentially proposing? Calling out a man for not fulfilling his guardian-redeemer role? Naomi and Ruth have been back far long enough for a close male relative to step up, but no one had. Ruth was a foreigner in a completely different social class. Boaz could have rejected her and thrown her out and no one would have given it a second thought.

Ruth 3:10-11 (NIV) ¹⁰ "The Lord bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character."

Not only is Boaz not insulted or upset with Ruth's boldness, he praises her and follows her lead. The word "kindness" here is translated from the Hebrew word, *chessed*.¹⁸ In other words, he is amazed at her loving kindness, both to helping preserve the names of Naomi and her husband, but also in asking him to step up. Not only that, the phrase translated "woman of noble character" here is actually ancient Hebrew for strength.¹⁹ Ruth is a strong, virtuous woman, with incredible character, and Boaz admires her for it. She could have done something simpler; met a younger man and started over, but she took a risk out of loving kindness to ensure Naomi would be cared for as well. Her *chessed* inspires Boaz to display *chessed* as well.

Boaz tells her he is in. He will do what it takes to be the redeemer, but there is one complication. Technically, there is another man who is a closer relative and must be first given the option before Boaz can marry her. Boaz commits to speaking to this other man, and whether it's this unnamed fellow, or Boaz, Ruth will be getting married and Naomi's family will be redeemed. But you'll have to wait until next week to hear how that plays out.

The chapter closes with these words from Naomi once Ruth fills her in:

Ruth 3:18 (NIV) Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

¹⁶ McKeown, *Ruth (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary)*, 56.

¹⁷ Glahn, *Vindicating the Vixens*, Kindle location 1417.

¹⁸ Frederic William Bush, *Ruth-Esther (Word Biblical Commentary)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 170.

¹⁹ Laffey and Leonard-Fleckman, *Ruth (Wisdom Commentary)*, 57.

This story is far greater than some fairy tale love story. It is a story of loving kindness, of deep *chessed*. It is a story of sacrificial love. It's a picture of the *chessed* of God for us; how He went far beyond the call of duty in sending Christ, our guardian-redeemer to us, how Christ went far beyond what He needed to do in dying for us and giving us eternal hope, providing ultimate redemption. There are three things I want to highlight from this chapter of Ruth that apply directly to us and the *chessed*, the loving kindness we are each called to display as we become like Christ:

LOVING KINDNESS IS INTENTIONAL

Did you notice how intentional Ruth was? She decided to glean, she asked to glean with the harvesters, she told Boaz he was her family redeemer. Being a Ruth means being intentional. Deciding to be lovingly kind and then deciding to take steps to make it happen.

She showed incredible courage at each of those times. She risked rejection, she risked people being angry, she risked her status. And yet the payoff is that she is celebrated as an example of incredible *chessed*.

It is too easy to be passive. To sit back. To just do what is required. But that isn't the love Christ calls us to, is it?

Matthew 5:41 (NLT) If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles.

We are called to go beyond. That requires intentionality. That requires initiative.

LOVING KINDNESS IS PATIENT

Ruth's story did not happen overnight. She spent months working hard in the fields providing for Naomi. It was not on her radar that she would some day marry Boaz. She simply displayed loving kindness for the sake of Naomi and worked day after day.

1 Corinthians 13:4a (NLT) Love is patient and kind.

Who is someone you need to be patient with your love and kindness? Is there something you are meant to do that you need to be more patient with? Part of love is being patient, trusting God to work things out in His timing.

LOVING KINDNESS SACRIFICES

Boaz sacrifices for Ruth and Naomi over and over. He gives of his harvest, he provides resources, he commits to marriage – which we'll see next week is at great cost to himself.

James 1:27 (NLT) Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

Boaz is demonstrating Christ's love when he sacrifices for these two widows. There is nothing they can do for him. There is no way this pays off for him in the world's eyes. And yet, in God's economy, Boaz is demonstrating *chessed*, loving kindness, and that has incredible eternal value.

[SUMMARY SLIDE] Where do you need to demonstrate loving kindness? With who? Ask God to show you how you can grow in your intentionality, your patience, and where you can sacrifice. Tell someone – your small group leader, a close Christian friend, me – what you want to do to grow in loving kindness so we can help you pursue it!