**Ruth, A Woman of Noble Character**

March 19, 2017

Ruth 3:1-18

Key Verse 3:11”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.”

Chapter 1 hit us with the bitter providence of God in the life of Naomi as she left her land, and lost her husband, her sons, and one of her daughters-in-law. But there was sweet providence as well. The famine ended in Judah and Naomi could go home. Ruth committed herself to care for Naomi. And all the while a guardian-redeemer named Boaz was preserved as a husband for Ruth to raise up an heir for the family name and property. But the chapter ends with Naomi overwhelmed with her losses: “The Almighty has made my life very bitter.” In chapter 2 the mercy of God breaks through bright enough for even Naomi to see it. We meet Boaz, a man of standing, a man of God, and a relative of Naomi's husband. We see Ruth taking refuge under the wings of God in a foreign land and being led mercifully by God to the field of Boaz to glean. And we see Naomi recover from her long night of hopelessness as she rejoices in God (2:20): “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.” Chapter 2 overflows with hope. Boaz is a godly man in his business and personal relations (2:4,10–13). Ruth is a God-dependent woman under the wings of God. Naomi is now a God-exalting woman under the sovereignty of God. All the darkness of chapter 1 is gone. God has turned her mourning into dancing. “The Almighty has made my life very bitter” (1:20) has given way to “He has not stopped showing kindness to the living and the dead” (2:20). Seek refuge under the wings of God even when they seem to be all shadows, and at just the right time God will let you look out from his Eagle’s nest onto some spectacular victory.

One of the lessons we learn from Ruth chapter 3 is that hope helps us dream. Hope helps us think up ways to do good. Hope helps us pursue our life with virtue and integrity. It is hopelessness that makes people think they have to lie and steal and seize illicit pleasures for the moment. But hope, based on the confidence that the Sovereign God is for us, helps us dream and plan for the future. People who feel like victims don’t make plans. One of the terrible effects of hopelessness is the inability to move purposefully and hopefully into the future. As long as Naomi was oppressed; as long as she could only say, “The Almighty has made my life very bitter,” she conceived no strategy for the future. When Naomi awakens in the last chapter to the kindness of God, her hope comes alive. She is concerned about finding Ruth a place of care and security, and she makes a plan. One of the reasons we must help each other “hope in God” (Psalm 42:5) is that only hopeful people plan for the future. People who have no hope waste their time in meaningless pleasures.

The harvest lasted for several weeks, at most. The time for the winnowing of the grain was at hand. Naomi had watched with interest how Boaz had cared for Ruth, and how Ruth had worked hard and with a thankful heart in Boaz’s fields. Naomi was thankful for all of Ruth’s labor. But Naomi was not like the evil step-mother in fairy tales, or the demanding mother-in-law from Korean soap operas. She thought about Ruth’s long term future. When Ruth had followed Naomi from Moab to Bethlehem, Naomi told Ruth that she could not promise her anything because she had nothing. Still Ruth came. It was her act of faith. And now, Naomi could see how the God of Israel had provided for her faithful daughter-in-law, Ruth, through the kindness of Boaz, a guardian-redeemer of her family.

Look at verses 1-4. “One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. 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. 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.’” Naomi took the initiative to find a husband for Ruth. But the strategy she comes up with is odd. She says in verse 2 that Boaz is a relative. Therefore he is the likely candidate for being Ruth’s husband. That way the family name and family inheritance will stay in the family, according to the Hebrew custom. So Naomi’s aim is clear: to win for Ruth a godly husband and a secure future, and preserve the family line. So she tells Ruth to make herself as clean and attractive as possible, go to the threshing floor of Boaz, and after he has lain down for the evening, sneak in, lift up his cloak, and lie down at his feet. Everybody, including Ruth, must be thinking, “And just where do you suppose that will lead?” To which Naomi gives the extraordinary answer in verse 4, “He will tell you what to do.”

What was Naomi’s motive? One thing is clear here and one thing is not. It is clear that this is Naomi’s way of trying to get Boaz to marry Ruth. It is not clear why she should go about it like this. Why not a conversation with Boaz instead of this highly suggestive and risky midnight maneuver? Was Naomi indifferent to the possibility that Boaz might drive Ruth away in moral indignation, or that he might give in to the temptation to have sexual relations with her? Did Naomi want that to happen? Or was Naomi so sure of Boaz and Ruth that she knew they would treat each other with perfect purity—that Boaz would be deeply moved by this outright offer of Ruth in marriage and would avoid sexual relations until all was duly solemnized by the city elders? The author doesn’t come right out and tell us why Naomi chose this sexually tempting strategy to win Boaz for Ruth. There will be a clue later, but for now the writer seems to want us to feel suspense and ambiguity. Just where did Ruth lie down? The Hebrew language is just as ambiguous as the English. What would Boaz tell her to do? Whatever Naomi’s motive was, the situation is one that could lead us into a passionate and illicit scene of sexual interaction or into a stunning scene of purity, integrity, and self-control.

Look at verses 6-9. “So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet! ‘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.” In verse 5 she had said that she would follow all of Naomi’s instructions. But Ruth does more. Naomi had said that Boaz would tell Ruth what to do. But before that happens, Ruth tells Boaz why she has come. She is lying at his feet under his cloak. He awakes and says, “Who are you?” She answers with words unprompted by Naomi, “I am Ruth, your servant; spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

In the law of Israel, there is a legal term called the guardian-redeemer. When someone was widowed, it was the responsibility of a close relative in the family to take her as his bride, so that she was not destitute. This was called levirate marriage, or kinsman marriage. This law is what Ruth and Naomi are using. Ruth is not merely Naomi’s pawn. She has gone willingly and now she takes the initiative to make clear to Boaz why she is there. “You are a guardian-redeemer of our family.” She meant, “You are the redeemer: the one who can redeem our inheritance and our family name from being lost. I want you to fill that role for me. I want to be your wife.” She doesn’t say it outright. In fact, she is less direct and more enticing. She says, “Spread the corner of your garment over me.” Now whether Boaz takes this to be an offer of outright sexual relations or something more subtle and profound will depend on his estimate of Ruth’s character. Sexual immorality was wrong in the Old Testament (Lev. 19:29; Deut. 21:13–21) just as in the New Testament (Mt 15:19).

There are two things, besides Ruth’s character, which suggest something subtle and profound is in fact going on here. One is this: the only other place where the phrase “spreading the garment” occurs in relation to lovers is found in Ezekiel 16:8. God is talking and he is describing Israel as a young virgin that he took for his wife. “Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you…I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine.” If this is any indication of what Ruth wanted from Boaz, the request went far beyond sexual relations. She was saying in effect, “I would like to be the one to whom you pledge your faithfulness and with whom you make a marriage covenant.”

But there is more to it than that; and this is the second indication of subtlety and depth here. When Ruth said, “spread the corner of your garment over me,” the word for corner of garment is the Hebrew word for wing (also in Ezekiel 16:8). This word is used only one other place in Ruth—namely, in the key verse from last week, 2:12, where Boaz says 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.” What we saw last week was that Boaz was God’s servant to reward Ruth for taking refuge under the wings of God. But we can guess what went through Ruth and Naomi. Ruth has told Naomi about these words of Boaz. And the more they ponder them, the more they become convinced that they are laden with subtle loving intentions. What Boaz really means is, “Because you take refuge under the wings of God, you are the kind of woman I want to cover with my wings.” In the middle-eastern custom, much older man would not openly express love to a younger woman. We can guess that Boaz was in mid 50s, and Ruth was in her 20s. Boaz expressed his intention with deeds of kindness and subtle words of admiration. He said he admired her for coming under God’s wings. He acted as though she were under his wings and he waited.

And in the course of time Naomi and Ruth hit upon a response just as subtle, just as profound. Ruth will come to him in his sleep, in the grain field where he has taken her under his care, and she will say yes. But she will say it with an action just as subtle and profound as the action and words of Boaz. She puts herself under his wing, so to speak, and when he wakes, everything hangs on one sentence and whether Ruth has interpreted Boaz correctly. Imagine how fast her pulse was racing when Boaz awoke. Then the all important words: “I am Ruth . . . spread your wing over your servant.” There must have been an immense silence for a moment while Boaz let himself believe that this magnificent woman had really understood—had so profoundly and sensitively understood. Here is a middle-aged man in love with a young widow whom he calls “my daughter,” uncertain whether her heart might be going after the younger men, communicating the best he can that he wants to be God’s wings for her. And here is a young widow gradually reading between the lines and finally ready to risk an interpretation by coming in the middle of the night to take refuge under the wing of his garment. That is amazing. Anybody who thinks that a manipulative mother-in-law is suggesting her daughter-in-law to sexually tempt Boaz into marrying her is on another planet.

We have to remember that it is midnight, they are under the stars, and Boaz is looking down into the face of the woman he loves covered with his own garment. “The Lord bless you, my daughter. This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier. You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. 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.” And then comes a word of magnificent righteousness and self-control. He says, “According to custom, Ruth, there is another who has prior claim to you and I won’t be able to proceed until all things are properly settled with him.” The stars are beautiful overhead, it is midnight, he loves her, she loves him, they are alone, she is under his garment . . . and he stops it for the sake of righteousness, and does not touch her. What a man! What a woman! The mood of today’s culture is, “If it feels good, do it, and to hell with your guilt-producing principles of purity and faithfulness.” But if the stars are shining in their beauty and your blood is pounding like a hammer and you are safe in the privacy of your place, stop . . . for the sake of righteousness. Let the morning dawn on your purity. Don’t be like the world. Be like Boaz. Be like Ruth. Profoundly in love. Subtle and perceptive in communication. Powerful in self-control. Committed to righteousness.

Boaz also said, “Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out.” When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he went back to town.” Ruth stayed with Boaz all night. In this way, Boaz assured Ruth that he had not brushed her off nor rejected her. But he sent her on her way before morning to protect her reputation and chances with the nearer guardian-redeemer. He also poured out 6 measures of barley grain into Ruth’s shawl to take back to Naomi. It was a sign of Boaz’s determination to see that Ruth and Naomi were provided for.

Naomi, Ruth and Boaz were people of genuine faith in God and honored God. May God help us to be men and women of noble character in this generation.