

**“Waiting on God”**  
**Ruth 3:10-18**  
**November 23, 2014**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We left the story last time at a point of dramatic tension. Ruth has just proposed marriage to Boaz, more as a command than a request. **“Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer”** (3:9). The tension is heightened even more by the fact that this was such a gutsy move for Ruth. Putting herself forward like this to such a powerful and influential man could easily have backfired. We are on the edge of our seats wondering how he will respond. The story has been told in such a way that we want Boaz to agree to her proposal. It would seem that Boaz has had the same response to Ruth that we as readers have had. He finds her a very attractive woman because of her qualities of loyalty and integrity. So he seems pleased by her proposal and offers a prayer of blessing upon her for what he sees as her righteous behavior.

We all know, however, that sometimes there’s a “but” coming at the end of such compliments. “Ruth, you’re a great woman, and I have much respect for you. *But* I won’t marry you.” Will such a “but” come after Boaz’s affirmation of her? We have to wait for verse 11 to get an answer to that, and our hearts thrill when he accepts her proposal. **“I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.”** Then, in what feels like a cruel twist, the dreaded “but” comes after he has accepted her proposal of marriage. **“Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I”** (3:12). Perhaps this is the reason Boaz didn’t put himself forward to pursue this marriage previously. Apparently, the role of kinsman-redeemer proceeded in the order of kinship, with the closest in relation having something of a first right of refusal to exercise the role of the kinsman-redeemer. There was a man with a closer kinship to Elimelech, Naomi’s deceased husband. So, once again, Ruth and Naomi find themselves waiting as this chapter comes to a close. Will their first choice of a kinsman-redeemer, Boaz, be able to marry Ruth, or will this unnamed and apparently unwanted redeemer become her husband?

Waiting on God has been a dominant theme of this book. It was Naomi and Elimelech’s failure to wait on God during a famine that led to their immigration to Moab in the first place. Once Naomi decided to return, both she and Ruth have been waiting to see how this would all turn out. Would there be a son raised up to carry on the name of Elimelech’s family? Would there be an answer to Naomi’s prayer back 1:9 that Ruth would find rest in the home of a husband? Now as we approach the end of the story, we do know that she will find a husband, but still we must wait to find out who it will be. What’s more, the God upon whom they wait seems to be hiding in the shadows. It is often the same for us, and that reality brings us to ask three questions of this text.

## I. Why Does God Stay in the Shadows?

We have seen before that one of the features of this book is the hidden hand of God guiding these events. The theological word we use for this is the providence of God. There are times when God governs his world in very open ways. Moses called down the ten plagues on Egypt in a way that couldn't be missed. He parted the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to cross safely, and then used the same sea to destroy the Egyptian army intent on capturing and re-enslaving Israel. And when they got hungry in the wilderness, he dropped bread from the sky. In events such as these, God comes out of the shadows and governs his world openly.

The working of his providence in this book is more subdued and hidden. So when Ruth goes out to glean, the author writes, tongue-in-cheek, that as luck would have it, she decided to glean in the field of Boaz that day. Of all the fields she could have chosen, she chose that one. Why? God was leading her to it even without her knowing it. His hand was kept hidden from her view in the way he accomplished his purpose. God was not only behind these little decisions that Ruth made all along the way that led her to Boaz's field, but he was also behind the kind of man Boaz was. It was God who had made Boaz a man of generosity, of *hesed* love. Had he not been so generous, Ruth and Naomi would still have been in great need.

God even quietly uses something he hates—the sins of his people—in order to accomplish his purposes. As a result of the sin of Naomi and Elimelech in fleeing Israel during the famine instead of trusting God, a young Moabite woman came to be a follower of Israel's God. In spite of her foolish plan for Ruth to approach Boaz about marriage, asking Ruth to perfume herself and climb into bed with Boaz without his knowing it and see what happened, God still brought the two of them together.

What we see in this story is the normal way God works—quietly and much more slowly than we would prefer. We think we would prefer for him to work more immediately and clearly, like in the days of Moses, but God's more normal way is to work like he does in this story, staying in the shadows but directing even the smallest details to his appointed ends. Why does God choose to stay in the shadows? I think there are two main reasons. First, if God were to come out of the shadows, his glory and splendor might very well blind us. Emily Dickinson, in her famous poem, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," writes, "The Truth must dazzle gradually/Or every man be blind." Second, God stays in the shadows to give us space to learn to trust him and love him.

This suggests an application that stems from one of the common commands in the Bible. We are told throughout the Scriptures to seek God. Implicit in that command is that God stays in the shadows. We seek for those things that are hidden, not the things in the open. Where do we find him, then? How exactly do we seek God? We do two things. We learn from the Scriptures what God looks like, and then we look for him in our personal stories. Wendy has a brother who is a geologist who searches for oil and gas hidden miles below the surface. He uses devices like seismic surveys to find the conditions that make the presence of oil and gas likely. He knows what these conditions look like, and he carefully searches these areas. We do the same when we seek God. We learn from the Bible that God is more interested in imparting Christlikeness to us than in giving us what we want. So we look in our life stories, especially our past, in search of ways God has engineered the details of our lives in order to promote our growth in holiness. I can see the hand of God in the wife he has given me, the church he calls me to pastor, and in so many other areas of life. Finding God's hand in these things strengthens my gratitude and my trust in God for the future.

## II. How Do We Connect with a God in the Shadows?

There has always been only one way to connect with God, and that's through trusting him. The Bible teaches throughout, including here in Ruth, that it is only when we trust God that we develop and enjoy a relationship with him. It is particularly through waiting on God during times of suffering that we learn to trust him. That has been the message of this book from the beginning to the end. The book opens with Naomi not trusting God during the suffering of a famine, leading her to immigrate to Moab. She and her husband were taking matters into their own hands by trusting themselves instead of God. Naomi did the same thing when she sought to acquire a husband for Ruth through her foolish scheme we looked at last time.

Ruth is the contrast to Naomi, the character in the book who shows us what it is to trust God in times of hardship. She doesn't take matters into her own hands, but trusts that God's heart toward her is good. She is willing to wait on him for the results he knows are best. As a result of her trust in God through hardship, she develops some very attractive qualities. Boaz notices this about Ruth. When he responds to her marriage proposal, he remarks about her two acts of kindness, which is our word *hesed*. He says to Ruth, **“You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich”** (v. 10). The first kindness was her faithfulness to Naomi, to the point that she was willing to leave her own homeland. Boaz sees in Ruth's marriage proposal a kindness even greater than that. Specifically, he sees it in the fact that she has approached him with the proposal instead of going after younger men, whether poor or rich

(Apparently, Boaz was old enough to be her father). The natural thing for a woman like Ruth, as is still the case today, is to marry for love, even if the one she loves is poor, or for money. Ruth is motivated by neither passion nor greed, but by her commitment to love the messy mother-in-law to whom she had attached herself. Because Boaz is a kinsman-redeemer, the first son born to Ruth through Boaz would be considered Naomi's son.

Boaz goes on to call Ruth a "worthy" woman. This is the same word used to describe Boaz in 2:1. He sees in Ruth a woman who is his equal, not because she has wealth or an ancestral heritage of Israelite nobility, but because she trusts God and has a character marked by love and integrity. This word "worthy" is used of a woman only one other place in the Old Testament, in that famous passage in Proverbs 31 which describes the virtuous woman. Interestingly, in the Hebrew Bible, the order in which the books appear is different than in our English Bibles. The book of Ruth comes right after Proverbs, likely indicating that Ruth was seen as the perfect illustration of the Proverbs 31 woman.

The New Testament has a well-known image for what Ruth had experienced in her hardships. In 1 Peter 1, he says that when we suffer, our faith is refined like fire removes the impurities in gold. Fire cannot destroy gold. It can make it soft and even change it from a solid to a liquid. As much as it tries, though, the fire will not be able to destroy the gold. What it will do is purify the gold from any impurities that may have gotten into the gold. They will either be burned off or rise to the top where the goldsmith can skim them off. When we trust God and wait on him during hardship like Ruth did, that's exactly what happens to our faith. Our faith is mixed with impurities. Sometimes I seek comfort more than I seek God. At other times I seek power or pleasure. Suffering burns off these impurities.

The application stemming from this is to receive the suffering God brings to your life rather than running from all hardships. That doesn't mean that we are called passively to accept all setbacks in life. If we can change a negative situation without sinning, by all means we should do so. But there are many things we simply can't change. If you're in a difficult marriage and you can't change your spouse, what are you going to do? Don't run from it. Embrace even the hardship as an opportunity to wait on God and have your faith refined like gold. If you have some physical suffering that defies the doctor's best attempts to bring relief, seek to find God in the midst of the pain. God knows how to bring good into our lives, to make us into worthy men and women, through even the most difficult of circumstances. How do we know that to be true? Let's look at that next.

### **III. Are There Tokens Pointing to this God in the Shadows?**

After telling Ruth about the other kinsman, Boaz gives to her six measures of barley. We're not told exactly what the standard of measure is in this case, but the most likely measure would make this about 80 pounds of barley. It is so heavy that Boaz has to lift it up for her to carry. He told Ruth, **"You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law"** (v. 17). In those words, we have again the theme of emptiness and fullness. Naomi had lamented earlier, **"I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty"** (1:21). The Lord is restoring her to fullness. This is a gesture full of grace from Boaz to Naomi. He is saying, "Naomi, I don't approve of your scheme with Ruth. You have reverted to your old pattern of taking matters into your own hands instead of trusting in God. That's the reason for your emptiness. Let this barley call you to trust in God for fullness rather than yourself.

Once again we see how Boaz reminds us of Jesus. He too is full of grace and tenderness. **"He does not break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick"** (Is. 42:3). In his strength, he also provides fullness. This blend of strength and tenderness lies at the core of who Jesus is. I wonder if it is this blend of strength and grace that led to the name given to one of the main two supporting pillars in the great temple of Solomon. Of these pillars we read, **"He set up the pillar on the south and called its name Jachin, and he set up the pillar on the north and called its name Boaz"** (1 Kings 7:21).

Naomi got the message. **"Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today"** (v. 18). This gift of barley served as a token of future provision. Does God give us any tokens as we wait for him? He certainly does. The provision of Jesus' death for us is probably the clearest token of God's good heart toward us. God says to us in Jesus, "I will not rest until I settle the matter." As you wait on God, you need to hear the voice of Jesus say, "It is finished." He has finished the work of paying for sin so that God is now favorable toward us. He gives us far more than six measures of barley. We have the Holy Spirit, forgiveness of sins, answered prayer, and a God who controls all things for our good. It is as we believe this that we have power to wait on God in faith.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Do you remember when the prophet Elijah fought the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel? After those exertions, he entered into a time of despair, feeling that everything was falling apart. Felix Mendelssohn wrote an oratorio called *Elijah*, in which Elijah laments saying, "My labor is in vain." Then he hears an angel singing those wonderful words from Psalm 37: "O rest in the Lord, wait patiently for him, and he will give thee thy heart's desires." Can you hear that song as you wait for the Lord?