

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Ruth: Does God really care about me?

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The Turning Point

Ruth 3

Introduction:

A. The loss of Joe Donahue reminds us of the hardships of life

Some night, you may get an unwanted phone call. The kind where you're awakened from sleeping, and you grope for the phone, and groggily put it to your ear. And then you find out that someone you love, and perhaps also depend upon, has been taken away. You're now wide awake, as you try to get some details about what happened, until eventually, you put the phone back down, knowing that life will never be the same.

For some in our Church Family, life will never be the same, as they got the news this week that Joe Donahue had passed away from his battle with cancer. Joe sat right up front here, and was the kind of guy that never met a stranger and loved serving. He will be greatly missed.

B. In tragedy we can wonder, "Does God really care about me?"

Now when we enter into a painful tragedy, whether it's the loss of a loved one, like Joe, or the loss of health, or the loss of hope, it can be tempting to wonder, "Does God really care about me?" Today we're in the third week of a four part series covering the book of Ruth, which speaks to this pointed question, "Does God really care about me?" It's such an important topic. After all, whether in the middle of the night, or at whatever time you get one of those dreaded phone calls, as you find yourself confused and even despondent, who wants to add to that pain by becoming sour towards God?

So, if you've got a Bible, please turn to Ruth 3, Ruth 3. Ruth is the 8th book in the Bible, right after Judges. As you turn, I'd like to invite you to please join with me in praying for our Church Family this month. After all, some of us are in the midst of horribly painful crises, and others of us may be headed towards a crisis that we're not spiritually prepared for. Now what we're covering in Ruth will not necessarily take away your tears, or your confusion, but as God makes it real in your life, it can give you strength to carry on, with more hope.

C. Review of Ruth chapters 1-2

Now the book of Ruth has four chapters, each chapter is one act in the story. So imagine you're watching a four part TV miniseries on the book of Ruth. At the beginning of the third episode, a narrator hits some highlights from Ruth chapters 1-2. That narrator could say,

“Previously on Ruth, in the dark time of the Judges, Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons leave Bethlehem because of famine. They live among the Moabites, a questionable people who share a checkered past with Israel. Elimelech and the sons die, leaving Naomi all alone – a poor, vulnerable widow whose family line may go extinct. So Naomi heads home, thinking that God cares about His people, but not about her. Incredibly, Naomi’s Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth displays loyal love as she commits to Naomi and her God, even though she’ll probably struggle to keep food on the table, be vulnerable to racism and abuse, and will only know her bitter mother-in-law.

Now Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem at harvest time, in need of food and family. And it looks like God does care about bitter Naomi, and loyal Ruth. For as Ruth risks her personal safety and searches for food, it just so “happens” that she finds the field of Boaz. Boaz just so “happens” to be godly and a wealthy relative of Elimelech, just so “happens” to be at his field, just so “happens” to give Ruth an abundance of food, water and protection, and just so “happens” to ask God to richly bless Ruth for her loyal love.

Naomi is excited about these developments, and decides that perhaps God does care about her after all. And given how God has already provided, and given the godliness and generous spirit of Boaz, he just might be willing to redeem and marry Ruth. However, now the harvest is ending, and Boaz has not yet proposed. Given the norms of the culture, it’s quite possible that Ruth may not have contact with Boaz for a while, and questions still remain. Will Naomi’s family line end with her death? And what of foreigner Ruth, will God further reward her loyal love? Will she find a husband, and a true place among God’s people?

I. The Turning Point – Ruth 3:1-18

A. The Plan – Ruth 3:1-5

Let’s find out more, as we cover act 3 of our story, the exciting climax. Please follow along with me, as I read Ruth 3:1, “¹ Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?’”

Back in verse 9 of chapter 1, Naomi prayed that God would allow Ruth to find rest with a new husband. Back then, bitter, hopeless Naomi thought that could only happen in Moab. But now, Naomi takes some initiative to help answer her prayer, as she tries to find Ruth security in the arms of the older Boaz. God has already worked on behalf of the women, and perhaps He will work through her plan too.

Please follow along with me in verse 2, where Naomi says, “² Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor.” Threshing is the last step of the harvest, so tonight ends the harvest. And again, given the norms of that culture, this could be Ruth’s last chance to see Boaz for months.

Now please look at verse 3 with me, as Naomi’s matchmaker plan gets very interesting. “³ Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.’ ⁵ And she replied, ‘All that you say I will do.’”

Naomi doesn’t want this moment to slip by, so she suggests that Ruth get dolled up. After all, this story predates deodorant, and Boaz has only seen Ruth sweating in his field. Further, it’s possible that dolling herself up would also clarify that Ruth had finished mourning for her deceased husband. Then, once Boaz has his fill of food and wine, Ruth is supposed to uncover his feet and lie by him, and let him tell her what to do. Yes, this is in your Bible, and things are getting interesting. Now in one sense, there’s an artistry to Naomi’s advice, as she suggests that Ruth invite marriage, and physical fertility, in a place of agricultural fertility, among all the grain of the fruitful harvest.

But artistic or not, what do you moms and dads think about Naomi’s advice? God wants to speak to us through the book of Ruth, but that doesn’t mean we’re supposed to emulate everything that each character thinks or does. It’s possible that Naomi’s motherly concern for Ruth has clouded her judgment. Now Naomi appears to be thinking about Ruth’s interests, as she seeks her security, but that doesn’t necessarily mean Naomi is dispensing the wisest advice.

It’s also important to note that their marriage customs are not identical to ours. Now we encourage a Christian bride and groom, for a lot of good reasons, to first commit to each other and then publicly declare that commitment, often in the form of a wedding, before they consummate the marriage. Dr. Gordon Johnston, one of my seminary professors, notes that marriages in the Old Testament also typically have commitment, public declaration, and consummation. However, although commitment comes first, sometimes in the Old Testament the consummation would occur before the public declaration. Take Isaac and Rebekah’s marriage in Genesis 24. A servant is sent to find Isaac a wife in another town. The servant finds Rebekah, who agrees to marry Isaac. So there’s the commitment. Then the servant and Rebekah

travel back to Isaac. And surprise, surprise, Isaac immediately takes her in his tent to consummate the marriage, which appears to take place before they publicly declare it. So, in their marriage the order was commitment, then consummation, and then public declaration, and there is not anything in that story that suggests they did things incorrectly.

So given their marriage customs, Naomi is not suggesting that Ruth engage in premarital sex. Rather, Naomi is sending Ruth down to invite Boaz to commit to marriage, and then perhaps to also consummate it that night. Then the next day they could make the public declaration as they tell the city elders and everyone else, “Congratulate us, we’re married.” However, although this could have been an acceptable order to do things in their culture, that doesn’t mean that Naomi’s suggestion that Ruth propose in the middle of the night, after Boaz has been drinking, was necessarily the wisest way to go about it.

B. The Proposal – Ruth 3:6-15e

But God is at work behind the scenes, so let’s look at verse 6 and see what happens. ⁶“So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her.” The author has built the suspense, and the original audience experienced an additional layer of suspense. For Ruth’s people, the Moabites, had a very shady beginning, which has many parallels with our current scene. In Genesis 19, Abraham’s nephew Lot loses his wife and his daughters lose the men they were pledged to marry. So Lot’s daughters hatch a wicked scheme to get Lot drunk at night and sleep with him so that they can preserve the family line. From this incestuous relationship Lot’s older daughter gave birth to Moab, the founder of the Moabites. And now Ruth, a descendant of Moab, is a widow living with another widow, kind of like to Lot’s two daughters. And now Ruth, like Lot’s daughters, approaches an Israelite man who has been drinking, at nighttime. Will our current scene also end with sexual manipulation?

Look at verse 7. ⁷“And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down.” Can you imagine the suspense for Ruth, as she lies there, waiting for Boaz to awake? This would be intense enough if it occurred in private, but Boaz would not be the only man at the threshing floor on the last night of the harvest. This might help explain why Naomi suggested to Ruth that she uncover Boaz’s feet. Perhaps Naomi hoped that Boaz would awake in the chill of the middle of the night, when the other men at the threshing floor were hopefully sleeping.

Look now at verse 8. “⁸ At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet!” Now we know that this is Boaz and Ruth, but they’re called “man” and “woman.” I think the author is helping us see the situation from the perspective of Boaz, who awakes with great surprise as he finds a woman at his feet.

How will Boaz respond? Look at verse 9. “⁹ He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.’” Back in chapter 2, Ruth also described herself as like the servant of Boaz. However, this time she uses a different Hebrew term (*amah*), which had a higher social standing and emphasized her availability for marriage. And so here in verse 9, Ruth boldly asks Boaz to spread his wings over her, which was an idiom in the Hebrew language asking him to marry her.

Perhaps Ruth used this terminology because of Boaz’s prayer from chapter 2. Look back at verse 12 of chapter 2 with me. Here Boaz prays that Ruth would be blessed by God, under whose wings Ruth had come to take refuge. Now look again at verse 9 of chapter 3. Here Ruth uses similar language as she invites Boaz to spread his wings over her. In a sense she’s inviting Boaz to be the answer to his own prayer. And sometimes God wants to do the same through us. Now the “wings” imagery might also explain another reason why Naomi told Ruth to pull Boaz’s cover back when she laid down. For now Ruth has given Boaz the opportunity to spread his blanket not only back over his own feet, but also over Ruth, as a symbol of her now resting under Boaz’s wings of protection.

Now Ruth has been following Naomi’s instructions so far, but here in verse 9 she makes an adjustment. Naomi told Ruth to wait for Boaz to tell her what to do. But Ruth instead speaks, asking Boaz to marry her while mentioning that he’s a redeemer. The book of Leviticus describes the “redeemer” as one who took care of needy family members. He would do things like repurchase family land that was sold out of economic necessity and redeem a relative who had to sell themselves into slavery.¹ The book of Deuteronomy, in chapter 25, does not directly use the term “redeemer” but describes an even stronger form of care for a needy family member. Here God’s Law commands the brother of a deceased man to marry his brother’s widow and raise a son in his name, which was a financial sacrifice.

So by mentioning that Boaz could be a redeemer Ruth is saying, “Don’t just marry me, but take care of Naomi.” For Ruth was not so much looking to find love at the threshing floor,

¹ Cf. Leviticus 25.

but continuing to show loyal love to Naomi. For as “redeemer” Boaz would support both Ruth and Naomi, and take on the expense of repurchasing Naomi’s family land. Further, if Ruth and Boaz had a son, Boaz would also take on the expense of raising that son, even though the son would continue the family line of Naomi, not Boaz, and that son would inherit the family land that Boaz would have to purchase. Further, that son, once he grew up, would take care of Naomi and Ruth if something happened to the older Boaz.

Now Boaz was not the brother to Ruth’s dead husband, so it does not appear that he was obligated by the Law to marry and redeem Ruth. But, let’s see what this godly and generous man has to say in verse 10. ¹⁰ And he said, ‘May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.’”

Boaz is again impressed by the “kindness” of Ruth. “Kindness” here is the Hebrew word *hesed*, a key term in the book that means “loyal love.” Now Boaz is impressed because instead of marrying someone her own age, Ruth wants to marry the much older family redeemer Boaz, which will help secure Naomi’s future and family line. Like Boaz did back in chapter 2, he again asks God to bless Ruth for her *hesed*. Who knows, perhaps God has more good things in store for loyal Ruth. And as verse 11 shows, Ruth’s reputation has spread, as now everyone in town knows that she is a worthy woman. Ruth may be a Moabite, but as she keeps showing loyal love towards her Israelite family, perhaps she’ll be fully accepted by the Israelite people.

However, look at verse 12, where there’s a wrench in the grand plan. ¹² And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I.” To our surprise, Boaz is not the closest relative! And apparently the closest male relative had the first choice as to whether or not to serve as redeemer. Now some scholars think that Naomi only intended for Ruth to get married, and that Ruth changed the plan by also asking Boaz to serve as a redeemer. And because of that change, Ruth and Boaz could no longer immediately marry. Other scholars think that because Boaz was a close relative, if he chose to marry Ruth that would also include having to serve as a redeemer. Now either way, because Boaz is not the closest relative, he cannot immediately marry and redeem Ruth. And this might explain why the godly Boaz had not previously offered to marry and redeem Ruth. And thankfully, Boaz does not take advantage of

Ruth's vulnerable position, for he is also a person of *hesed*. Things are going to turn out much differently here than they did back with Lot and his daughters.

And now that the marriage offer is on the table, we see Boaz spring into action, starting in verse 13. ¹³ ‘Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning.’ ¹⁴ So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, ‘Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.’ ¹⁵ And he said, ‘Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out.’ So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her.”

In verse 13 Boaz assures Ruth that he'll resolve the situation. All Ruth has to do for now is lie down again, and I bet she's lying down with a little less tension than before. Then, very early in the morning, before others could see her, Boaz sends her off. But she isn't empty handed, as he gives her six measures of barley. In the Hebrew the text does not clarify which Hebrew measure. So we don't know for sure the exact amount of barley, but let's finish the chapter and see its impact, starting with the end of verse 15.

C. The Update – Ruth 3:15f-18

“Then she went into the city. ¹⁶ And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, ‘How did you fare, my daughter?’ Then she told her all that the man had done for her, ¹⁷ saying, ‘These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, ‘You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’” ¹⁸ She replied, ‘Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.’”

Look again at verse 17 with me. Here we see Boaz telling Ruth, “You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.” Now look back with me at verse 21 of chapter 1. Here Naomi said, “I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.”

Now as we conclude chapter 3, it looks like Naomi's emptiness is about to be filled. For chapter 3 ends poetically, in early daylight, with more grain. Naomi and Ruth's need for food has been fully satisfied, and their need for family may also soon be satisfied. For ancient people connected the idea of agricultural fertility with the fertility of having children.² So given this connection, and more importantly, that God is working behind the scenes through godly Boaz, it looks like Ruth will soon have a husband, and hopefully also a son.

² Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT, 226.

But questions still remain. Will the Israelite people fully accept Ruth, even though she's a Moabite? Will Boaz get to marry Ruth, or miss out because of the closer redeemer? And will Ruth and Naomi finally have that son/grandson who can secure the future of the family's line and well being? After all, Ruth was not able to have children with her former husband.

Well, next week we'll see what comes of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, as we continue to wrestle with the question, "Does God really care about me?" I hope you'll be here for the conclusion to the story, especially if the pain of Naomi and Ruth has hit close to home.

II. Application

A. Reminder of previous applications (Naomi and Ruth)

Until then, could you identify with any of our characters? In the first week we focused on Naomi. We encouraged anyone struggling to believe that God cares to seek the help of a "Ruth-like" friend and consider anew God's care for them. Then last week we highlighted Ruth, the woman of *hesed*. Perhaps, like Ruth, God wants you to care for someone whose pain you can identify with and minister to; just as widow Ruth greatly served her fellow widow, Naomi.

B. Perhaps, like Boaz, God wants you to show His care for the poor

Now this week we turn our attention to Boaz. Perhaps, like Boaz, God wants you to show His care for the poor, as you use the resources He's given you to help others. Is there someone you can be a Boaz to?

It's an important question, for the Bible has a lot to say about God's concern for the poor. Take Proverbs 14:31, which says, "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him." Or take the words of Jesus from Matthew 25, which say that anytime we help a poor brother or sister in need, it's as if we assist our Lord Jesus Himself!

That's heady stuff, and an incredible opportunity. For as we, like Boaz, take steps of faith to help someone in need, who knows how God might multiply our efforts? We'll have to wait till next week to fully see how God blesses the efforts of Boaz, and Ruth, but think about how far things have already progressed for Naomi.

Conclusion:

A. God often shows His care is by providing people who care

And when people are going through dark times, like Naomi was, it's tempting to wonder, "Does God really care about me?" And God often shows His care by providing people who care, people like Boaz. Now I'm guessing most of us don't consider ourselves to be rich, but by global standards, if you have a place to lay your head, food in the pantry, and multiple pairs of

clothing, then you, and I, are rich. And whether we're rich or not, God can bless our efforts as we help others in need.

B. Joe Donahue received and gave care, and we should too

And I'm so thankful that so many in our Church Family are helping the poor; as you give to the church, as you make special gifts to the church's benevolence fund and food pantry, as you sponsor needy children overseas, as you serve others in need and the organizations that assist them; and as you helped Joe Donahue in his battle with cancer - with prayers, with clothing, with emotional support, with food, with help navigating governmental benefits, and with his funeral expenses. Now late in his life, you probably would not have considered Joe financially well off, for he experienced homelessness. And Joe, like the rest of us, wasn't perfect, but I'd like to share two memories that evidence God's work in His life.

Earlier this year, at one of our church brunches, my wife Stephanie and I were talking with Joe. Joe, being Joe, insisted that we go ahead of him in line. And as we stood there, I asked how he was doing. Now as Joe shared about the hardships as his cancer progressed, he also shared his hope. Joe said, "When I die, I know where I'm going." Joe knew that God really cared, enough to send His Son Jesus, who died for Joe, so that Joe could know Him and serve Him; and so that Joe can now bask in His presence, pain and cancer-free.

Now some of you know that Joe served our church by helping maintain and improve the grounds. And the second memory that kept coming to mind this week was seeing Joe, even in recent months, as his cancer progressed, mowing the church's lawn in the oppressive San Antonio heat. Now I can't help but think that these two memories are related. That's Joe's confidence in God's care for him gave Joe the strength and motivation to keep serving God and his church family, even as death approached.

Now most of us, like Joe, don't have the wealth of Boaz. But I hope, like Joe, that you've experienced God's care for you in Jesus. And I hope, like Joe, that you use what God has placed in your hand to bless others. Perhaps even this morning, God will continue to multiply the efforts of Joe Donahue. As we close, please picture Joe out there, mowing the yard, in the heat, as cancer ravaged his body; and consider, "How can you use what's in your hand to show God's care to someone in need?" Let's pray...

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.