

Naomi's Surprising Plan

Ruth 3

In the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye's daughter Tzeitel faces a moral dilemma. The question is "Who will she marry?" Will she marry for love – her true love, Motel, the nice but very poor Tailor. Or will she marry for her family – the old, but wealthy butcher, Lazar Wolf.

Lazar Wolf is the man her family has chosen for her – This is the arrangement made by the town matchmaker, Yente. This is the agreement that Tzeitel's father has given his blessing to. There is an agreement. Yes he is old – but at least she will be provided for - she will have security, and the family will gain a wealthy relative.

What will happen? It is a dilemma. Will she marry for love, or for family? For LOVE we cry – you must marry for love!! Well... the other side argues...what about the tradition of arranged marriages? And we say - That is not right – is it? **You** should be able to chose whom **you** want to marry! Well, says the other side - how about the financial support for herself, or more importantly for her large poor family? That's easy - we respond - True love has no price tag! We want her to be happy – can you put a price on happiness? Well...the argument continues - but what about sacrifice of personal desires for the greater good? Yes, we say, that is a good point - sacrifice is commendable but not in something like who you should marry – that is too much of a... well, sacrifice! Well the other side plays its trump card - doesn't Tzeitel need to honor and obey her parents? That is a harder one – Usually we do want to obey our parents... but aren't they in the wrong here? It isn't right to ask her to marry such an older man – She should be free to marry someone her own age. Isn't love is the ultimate trump card.

Believe it or not my friends, this introduction is not very far from our story as we move into chapter three, continuing our series called Living Above and Beyond – Living a Life of Hesed.

Today Ruth faces the choice between marrying for love or marrying for family. Ruth faces Naomi's surprising plan and the results are even more surprising. Once again we will see *hesed* - loyal abundant love and kindness displayed for us – and it is truly glorious! Please turn with me to Ruth chapter three.

The Plan's Expectation (Ruth 3:1-2a)

Like Fiddler on the Roof – chapter three begins with a plan. A plan with a simple, clear expectation – *marriage* between Ruth and Boaz. The matchmaker is Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi.

Naomi says, “shall I not seek security for you.” Security is the same word that Naomi used in chapter one when prayed the Lord would provide husbands for both Orpah and Ruth.

Marriage is proposed to Boaz. Why? Well Naomi points out that – **Boaz is a kinsman** (verse two). This has been emphasized three times now in our text – and he is not only a relative, but a close relative (chapter 2, verse 20) a family redeemer - a person with moral obligation to help the family in their time of need. But he is not the only relative, indeed he is not the only redeemer – as we will learn later. So why Boaz instead of someone else? Because Boaz is a *Gibbor Hayil* – Remember that Hebrew phrase? He is a wealthy, noble man of good character. He has already shown great kindness to Ruth – The plan is to take it to the next level to marriage.

The Plan Explained (Ruth 2:2b-6)

Do you remember the A-Team – It is one of my all time favorite TV shows. Hannibal Smith B.A. Barakus, Face Man and Murdock. Like Ruth the A-Team used a problem based plot – Setting, introduction of problems, development of the plot and a turning point. Usually the turning point included a plan to turn a school bus into a tank with a small blow torch and pieces of sheet metal! In

the problem based-plot of Ruth we are at the turning point, and we too have a plan – Naomi explains the plan to Ruth in verses 2-6:

The Five-Part Plan:

1. First Naomi sets the location: “Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight.”

Probably this is a little way out of town, the harvesters would set up an area, called the threshing floor to winnow the grain. They would throw the grain in the air to separate the barley from the husks. There would be a wind at night, just right for blowing away the chaff.

2. The second part of the plan is to prepare Ruth (3:3a) - “Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your *best* clothes, Ruth is to make herself attractive to the eye and to wear perfume – to be enticing. Wow – what kind of plan is this?

3. Third – Ruth is to “Go down to the threshing floor. No to talk to Boaz - *but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. It shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies.*” (3:3b-4a). You see it is to be a surprise meeting, at night, in the dark. She must know where he lies down so she will not accidentally go to the wrong person!

4. Fourth. After Boaz is asleep - “go and uncover his feet and lie down.” (3:4c) Quietly Ruth is to sneak down to the place where he is, in the cover of darkness, and uncover his feet, and lie down at his feet. Wow. That’s weird.

5. Fifth, and last, Naomi says, “He will tell you what you shall do.” That is, Ruth’s part is done at this point – the ball will be in Boaz’s court – Ruth’s job is to let him lead the dance from that point forward.

Now if you thought the A-Team came up with some strange plans, and turning a school bus into a tank was far fetched – how is this for a marriage proposal? How do you feel about this plan?

Why send a single woman to meet a man in the dark on the threshing floor – why uncover his feet? Why lie next to him? Why make yourself attractive? The questions pop like popcorn.

Some scholars hold that Naomi has lost all sense of propriety and sends Ruth to a compromising situation. Sinclair Ferguson, a respected scholar, rebukes Naomi openly in his commentary on Ruth and describes Naomi's plan as "A disturbing element. A scheme. Plotting. "Behind her risky strategy lies Naomi's old spiritual rashness...If God does not do things speedily enough for us in our way, then we will take matters into our own hands. "Naomi is acting in a reckless manner." You can see how one might take this view – the plan is certainly unorthodox. But there is another perspective. Consider three points.

First, as unorthodox as the plan seems to be – at this point in the story we know Ruth now to be a godly woman, and Boaz a godly man. The fact that Ruth agrees to this plan (vv. 5-6) and Boaz responds favorably to it indicate that perhaps the plan is not as inappropriate as it seems from the first reading. That was a different time and culture.

Second, a bold plan was needed to compel a response from Boaz. As kind as Boaz was to Ruth, neither the problem of widowhood or extinction had been solved. And I believe it had become clear to Naomi that Boaz was not going to propose marriage on his own. Why do I say Boaz was not going to propose marriage on his own. I take it because of a presumably large age difference between himself and Ruth. He saw himself as a father figure to Ruth and not a suitor and so the proposal must be brought to him. Scholar Andre LaCocque says, "Ruth's offer of marriage is an act of charity to which Boaz does not remain insensitive...(it was unexpected – out of the ordinary) We do not know how old Boaz was; according to Jewish tradition, he was eighty years old at this time. He belongs to Naomi's generation, not to hers." Naomi's plan was designed to break the impasse and move Boaz to action.

Third – consider the fact that God works through this plan. Naomi’s plan! Hubbard writes: “A significant theological point emerges here...Here human means (i.e. Naomi’s plan)...models one way in which divine and human actions work together.” Naomi prayed that Yahweh would provide a husband for Ruth in chapter one and now she is the answer to her own prayer – how often God works that way! Hubbard argues, “Believers are not to wait passively for event to happen (that is for Boaz to propose marriage), they must seize the initiative when an opportunity presents itself. They assume that God presents the opportunity.” That is God opened the door providentially – so Naomi and Ruth continue to walk down that path, with this plan.

There is the plan – whether you take it as reckless or resourceful – garish or genius - It is the plan we have – and now let’s see how the plan is executed in verses 7-15.

The Plan Executed Ruth 3:7-15

In verse 7, everything is going great! Boaz eats and drinks – he lies down after a hard days work. Ruth is there – watching everything. After it has grown dark, and she is sure he is asleep – she creeps out and uncovers his feet and lay down. In verse eight, we see the reason for uncovering his feet – it was an ancient alarm clock – as the night got colder, his exposed feet caused him to wake up. He is startled greatly, as you can imagine.

He asks in verse nine, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth your maid. Again, everything is going according to plan. And now what is she suppose to do? Remember verse four, “he will tell you what you shall do.”

Notice – this is **not** what Ruth does – she departs from Naomi’s instructions and says with some conviction (3:9) : “I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative.” We must notice a few important items – first Ruth refers to herself as “your maid.” The Hebrew is *amah* means “slave, maid and concubine.” This is how Ruth offers herself

in marriage with humility as a subordinate - not as a social equal.

Second, she says, “spread your covering over me your maid,” which is an idiom of that day – proposing marriage. Symbolically in those days, the man would take his garment and cover his bride as a symbol of his intent that she would become his wife.

Third, and this is most important she says, – “for you are a close relative.” The Hebrew is “goel”. The kinsman-redeemer – family redeemer. What does it mean to be a redeemer? One dictionary describes the goel as “A close relative under obligation to help. (NIDOTTE). Another state that the goel’s job is “To redeem his kin from difficulty or danger. (TWOT).

Who needs help here? What does Ruth do by invoking and calling Boaz out as the redeemer? It is not just Ruth who needs help Naomi as well. Do you see? By invoking Boaz’s obligations as a redeemer – we have moved beyond a simple proposal of marriage to a call for broader assistance to Naomi and the problem they face. This becomes clear in Boaz’s response:

Boaz says, “May you be blessed of the LORD, my daughter – why? You have shown your last kindness (offering herself to marry Boaz) is greater than the first. What was the first act of kindness? Her beautiful vow of loyalty to Naomi in chapter one. Offering herself to Boaz in marriage is greater than this. Does that surprise you? It is amazing! Remember *Fiddler on the Roof* the illustration we opened with? Here Ruth chooses family over personal desires. Her offer of marriage to Boaz is amazing – recall my comments about Boaz’s age.

Boaz says, “Your last kindness is better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich.” She could have married a young poor man for love – like Motel the Tailor. Or she could have married a young rich man for money – and been independent from Naomi and Elimelech’s tragic family. LaCocque says, “The attractive Ruth chooses to be with a man older than herself...here again, Ruth shows *hesed* and not blind romance. Her choice is motivated by other

criteria, knowing Boaz's noble character and his compassion...these qualities are more important ...than being physically attracted and than being well matched with regard to age.

Do you see? If this all works out both problems of our book can be resolved. Ruth will no longer be a widow, Naomi will be taken care, and the family line of Elimelech will be extended through Boaz and Ruth's children – because Boaz is related to Elimelech. The A-Team's Hannibal Smith used to say, "I love it when a plan comes together." And we could not be more pleased with how this plan is shaping up.

And just when we are ready to close the book and sigh deeply with satisfaction, Boaz pulls the rug out. He says in verse 12: "Now it is true I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I. Remain this night, and when morning comes, if he will redeem you, good; let him redeem you. But if he does not wish to redeem you, then I will redeem you, as the LORD lives. Lie down until morning." Rats! Now we have one redeemer too many! So in the morning while it was still dark Boaz sends her home loaded with more barley grain for Naomi.

The Plan's Epilogue (3:16-18)

Now we turn to the plan's epilogue. Ruth returns home and Naomi is up waiting – and asks, "How did it go, my daughter?" And she told her all that the man had done for her. Ruth tells her everything and then adds, "These six *measures* of barley he gave to me, for he said, 'Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'" Do you see our good God – Naomi said in chapter one – "the Lord sent me out full and I returned empty." Now Naomi is being filled up by a good God – another probably 70 pounds of barley! But the focus of this epilogue is Boaz's announcement that there is another redeemer – of even closer family ties than he is. Then she said, "Wait, my daughter, until you know how the matter turns out; for the man will not rest until he has settled it today." The story is not over, and next week we will get "the rest of the story" concerning this closer relative.

Main Application: Bigger and Better

Think with me about application. Our culture is into bigger and better. We read, *Better Homes and Gardens*. We like to look at bigger homes, better schools, bigger cars, better television sets. Bigger and better. Chapter three is about an act of hesed that is bigger and better than – love that goes above and beyond anything we have seen.

In the *Fiddler on the Roof* story (in case you didn't know) Tzeitel fights against her father – and Tevye breaks his contract with Lazar Wolf – and get family support of this through deceit. When I watched the play for the first time – I was so glad about that! I want them to be happy. The sacrifice for tzeitel would have been... too much. We need to rethink this! Isn't it interesting that in our story, no sacrifice seems to be too great for Ruth – she sacrifices her homeland, and she sacrifices any other marriage proposals so that Naomi can be taken care of, and that and heir might be found.

It was the greatest act of hesed, because it as the greatest sacrifice. She gave up all other paths in life to show hesed to Naomi and to Boaz.

And so as you consider your friends, your children, your wife, your husband, your neighbor, to the person who does not know Christ's love - what are you willing to sacrifice in order to show love? Ruth three pushes us to even greater acts of hesed. Has anyone ever said to you, "I can't believe how kind you are being to me – it overwhelms me." If not, why not? Probably because the sacrifice is too much. Our model is Christ – who sacrificed everything to show his love to us – Ruth has set an example for us – Are you willing to follow?