

ephesians 5:25

Two to Get Ready

The Story of Boaz and Ruth

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It had been more than 500 years since they laid old Jacob to rest in the cave of Machpelah. They were eventful years for Jacob's descendants. There were the hard years of Egyptian bondage culminated by God's gracious deliverance; there were the forty years of wilderness wanderings culminated by the great conquest of Canaan; then there were the strange cyclic years of sin, servitude, and salvation we know as the period of the Judges. That gloomy era provides the setting for the most beautiful love story in the Bible, the story of Boaz and Ruth.

"Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons" (Ruth 1:1). That man, named Elimelech, died in Moab, leaving his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chileon. The boys married Moabite women, and then, in what seemed to be a tragic twist of fate, both of them died, leaving Naomi in a strange land with only her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. When she heard that God had prospered her people with food, she decided to return home to Bethlehem.

Orpah remained in Moab at Naomi's suggestion, but Ruth would not hear of it. She was one of those rare persons who loved deeply and selflessly, and she loved her mother-in-law. Remember her famous words? "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (Ruth 1:16). Her God was about to direct her to a wonderful man with whom she would be united.

The first thing that strikes us about these two whom God brought together by His grace is *their spiritual preparation*. Although Elimelech's family was out of the center of God's will and out of the place of God's blessing, they did accomplish something worthwhile. Through their testimony, this young Moabite named Ruth turned from worshiping Chemosh, the God of the Moabites, with all the abominable practices associated with his worship, and put her trust in the one true and living God. "Your God shall be my God," she boldly declared. And it was evident to all who knew her that she had come to enjoy an intimate relationship with the Lord God of Israel. Sometime later, Boaz would say to her, "May the Lord reward your work, and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge" (Ruth 2:12). Her trust in God and her love for God were the sources of an inner strength and beauty that could not be hidden and of a love for others that could not be suppressed.

Consider what she did. Instead of brooding over the loss of her own husband, she devoted herself to meeting the needs of her mother-in-law, to filling the void in Naomi's life, to helping her the best she could. That meant leaving her home, her family, and her friends, moving to another land as a despised foreigner and living in poverty and privation. And for what? Love

and concern for her mother-in-law were her only apparent motives. Boaz pointed that out later in the story: “All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know” (Ruth 2:11).

Many a woman who loves her husband cannot seem to love his mother. And men seem to have the same problem with their wives’ mothers, as evidenced by the mother-in-law jokes that have circulated through the years, Where does love like Ruth’s come from? It comes from the Lord of all love. If you want some of it, you will have to cultivate a close personal relationship with Him just as Ruth did. When we get to know God and understand how much He gave for us, we are encouraged to give of ourselves for the good of others, even our in-laws. And when we do that, tension and turmoil begin to dissolve into harmony and happiness.

It is never too soon to learn these lessons of love. We can begin teaching them to our children very early in their lives. The training ground for love is the home. A loving relationship with parents and brothers and sisters will prepare them to love their mates and their mates’ parents as they should. Some folks who are reading this chapter may have come from unloving homes and they are finding their early influences hard to overcome. It is difficult for them to give or to receive love. They can testify to the importance of parents setting a loving example, then teaching their children to be helpful and good-natured and to show kindness and respect for others in the home. Children will not know how to love when they marry unless they show love to those with whom they live right now. But it all begins with our love affair with the Lord. When we have experienced the love of God, we will express it in our family relationships—parents, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, children, and in-laws. Ruth is ready for a beautiful love affair with Boaz because she is in love with her Lord and that love is spilling out to others in her life.

Now let us meet the Prince Charming in Ruth’s future. The story implies that Boaz is much older than she (cf. Ruth 3:10). We do not know whether he was a bachelor or a widower, but we do know that he was a man of God. The Lord was an important part of his daily life. He thought often about the Lord, spoke freely of the Lord, and allowed the Lord to be a part of his everyday business dealings.

Listen to him greet his reapers in the field. “May the Lord be with you,” he said. And they responded, “May the Lord bless you” (Ruth 2:4). To Ruth he declared, “May you be blessed of the Lord, my daughter” (Ruth 3:10). And again, “I will redeem you, as the Lord lives” (Ruth 3:13). All the people who attended his wedding acknowledged his dependence upon God for his future posterity: “May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel” (Ruth 4:11).

The first prerequisite for a successful marriage is that the man be a man of God. One reason so many marriages are floundering is because the husbands have not prepared themselves spiritually for their task. Some fellows could not think about anything but sex during their

courtship days. And if it wasn't sex, it was cars or sports. They spent little or no time studying the Word, memorizing it, discovering how it applied to their lives, and learning from it what their responsibilities as Christian husbands and fathers would be. The Lord was not part of their daily living. And when they walked to the altar they were still spiritual babies, ill-prepared to assume the spiritual leadership of their homes. It is no surprise that their marriages are in trouble.

Men, if you have wasted the years until now, there is no time to lose. Start cultivating a personal walk with Jesus Christ. Spend time regularly studying the Scriptures and learning from them how God wants you to live your life and discharge your responsibilities. Begin consulting Him about everything. If you are involved in an unhappy marital situation, the damage can be repaired, but the place to begin is with this matter of daily involvement with the person of Jesus Christ. Other efforts will fail until our hearts are right with Him and we are growing in His likeness.

Ruth and Boaz were both ready. So we turn from their spiritual preparation to *their sterling courtship*. Naomi and Ruth had now arrived in Bethlehem, and the problem facing them was how to find enough food to eat. God had made a gracious provision in the Mosaic Law for folks in their predicament. Farmers were not permitted to reap the corners of their grain fields nor gather the gleanings; they were to leave them for the poor, for foreigners, for widows and orphans (Lev. 19:9, 10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19). Almost any way you look at it, Naomi and Ruth were qualified. They were poor widows and Ruth was a foreigner. Since Naomi was getting a little too old to work in the fields, Ruth asked if she might go and find the field of some kind man who would allow her to glean. Naomi gave her permission. "So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech" (Ruth 2:3).

The work was not easy—stooping and bending all day long as she gathered the grain into her long flowing cloak, the burden getting heavier with each stalk she gleaned, and the sun beating down on her back in that semi-tropical climate. A few of the bigoted hometown folks were probably taunting her because of her foreign accent, and some of the men seemed to be trying to put their hands on her (cf. Ruth 2:9). Every impulse in Ruth's body urged her to flee to the purple mountains of Moab which she could see in the distance. That was home; that was where she belonged. But with quiet courage, simple modesty, and total unselfishness, she labored on.

We fully expect Boaz to notice her. And he did. "Whose young woman is this?" he asked his servant who was in charge of the reapers. "She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab," he replied (Ruth 2:5, 6). Boaz lost no time in doing some nice things for Ruth. He invited her to stay in his fields and glean as much as she wanted, and to drink freely from the water pitchers provided for his own workers.

Nowhere does it say that Ruth was a beautiful woman like Sarah, Rebekah, or Rachel. We do not know whether she was or not, but we do know that she had an inner beauty, a meek and

quiet spirit, an unpretentious humility that made her one of the loveliest women in Scripture. She bowed low before Boaz in genuine gratitude and said, "Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" (Ruth 2:10). Her humility was evident again when she said, "You have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants" (Ruth 2:13). There was nothing put on about this. It was real. And this genuine humility, this meek and quiet spirit is one of the most valuable assets a woman can have. Peter says it is of great value in God's sight (1 Pet. 3:4). It might be a good trait for Christian women to ask God to help them develop.

It looks as though Boaz is getting more interested in this lovely woman as the day goes on. At mealtime he invited her to join him and his reapers for lunch, and he made sure she was served all that she wanted. When she finished eating and got up to return to work, Boaz said to his servants, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. And also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her" (Ruth 2:15, 16).

So Ruth continued to glean until evening. And when she beat out what she had gleaned, it was nearly a bushel of barley. It seems as though Boaz was a kind man, thoughtful, considerate, and gentle. There are not too many of them around anymore, judging from what many women are sharing with marriage counselors. Some men have the strange notion that kindness and gentleness are effeminate traits and they go out of their way to avoid them. Not at all! They are Christ-like traits. And Christ was a rugged man's man. Surveys show that kindness and gentleness rank near the top of the characteristics women are looking for in a husband. They would be good traits for Christian men to ask God to help them develop.

Well, it was time to make a move. And strangely enough, in that culture it was Ruth's move. You see, God gave another interesting law to the Jews that required a man to marry the childless widow of his dead brother. The first son born of that union would bear his brother's name and inherit his brother's property (Deut. 25:5-10; Lev. 25:23-28). It was called the law of the "levirate" marriage, from the Hebrew word for "brother." If no brother was available, a more distant relative might be asked to fulfill this duty. But the widow would have to let him know that he was acceptable to be her "goel," as they called it, her kinsman-redeemer and provider.

Naomi told Ruth exactly how to do that. Ruth listened carefully and carried out her instructions precisely. Boaz would be sleeping on the threshing floor that night to protect his grain from thieves. After he went to sleep; Ruth tiptoed in, uncovered his feet, and laid down. By this act she was requesting Boaz to become her goel. Needless to say, Boaz was somewhat startled when he rolled over in the middle of the night and realized there was a woman lying at his feet. "Who are you?" he asked. She answered, "I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative" (Ruth 3:9). Spreading his cloak over her would signify his willingness to become her protector and provider. His response was immediate: "May you be blessed of the Lord, my daughter. You have shown your last kindness to be better than the first

by not going after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you ask, for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence” (Ruth 3:10, 11).

It is important to understand that there was nothing immoral in this episode. This procedure was the custom of the day, and the record emphasizes the purity of it. In the secluded darkness of the threshing room, Boaz could have gratified his human desires and no one but Ruth would have known. But he was a godly, moral, self-disciplined, Spirit-controlled man, and he kept his hands off. Scripture says that Ruth slept at his feet until morning (Ruth 3:14). Furthermore, Ruth had the reputation of being a woman of excellence (Ruth 3:11). She had physical drives like any other normal woman, but she learned to claim God’s grace and strength to hold those drives in check until marriage. Boaz and Ruth both knew that God’s greatest blessing in marriage would require purity before marriage. Carelessness in this area would bring guilt, loss of self-respect, and suspicion. And it could leave scars on their souls that would make their adjustment to each other in marriage most difficult.

Theirs is a vanishing viewpoint. Satan has brainwashed our society into believing premarital sex is perfectly acceptable. Most young people have experienced it before graduating from high school, and it is the rare engaged couple that even tries to refrain anymore. “But we love each other,” they protest. No they don’t. They love only themselves. They love to gratify their own sensual desires. If they loved each other, they would not subject each other to the hazards of disobeying God, for He says He is the avenger of all who ignore this standard (1 Thess. 4:6). It is not that God is a mean old judge who just wants to keep us from having fun. He simply knows that premarital purity will be best for us and for our marriages. Our society is paying the price for promiscuity by unprecedented marital turmoil and innumerable broken homes with all the emotional trauma they bring. God’s way is always best!

Boaz and Ruth did it God’s way. We are not surprised to see, finally, *their successful marriage*. Not a great deal is actually said about their relationship with each other after the wedding, but we may assume from what we have already learned about them that their marriage was richly blessed of God. Scripture does say, “So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son” (Ruth 4:13).

The most unusual aspect of this story is the continuing role Naomi played in their lives from this point on. As a former mother-in-law, we would expect her to drop out of the picture, but Boaz and Ruth are too loving and caring to let that happen. When their baby was born, the women of Bethlehem said to Naomi, “Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him” (Ruth 4:14, 15). Then Naomi took the baby and cared for him, and the neighbor women said, “A son has been born to Naomi!” (Ruth 4:17). Imagine that! They all considered that baby to be Naomi’s own child, and Boaz and Ruth happily permitted it. Boaz continued to provide for Naomi until her death, and he seems to have done it cheerfully.

And Ruth's love for her never waned. The women called Ruth "your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons."

Now that Ruth had her husband, she could have resented her former mother-in-law as an intruder. Many women would have. But when a person is filled with the love of God, his heart is big enough to engulf more than just one special person, or even a special few. He tenderly and unselfishly reaches out to meet the needs of others as well. It is striking to observe how God's love in Ruth's life overcame all obstacles—poverty, racial prejudice, age disparity, physical temptations, and even mother-in-law differences. There is a good possibility that God's love can solve the problems in our lives. As we come to understand and enjoy his unconditional love for us, and allow that love to flow through us, we think less and less about ourselves and more and more about others. And the problem-solving potential of that self-sacrificing, self-giving love is phenomenal.

Let's talk it over

1. Discuss your family backgrounds and the love shown in your homes as you were growing up.
2. Are you making your home a training ground for lessons in love? What can you do to train your children to live lovingly with others?
3. What spiritual preparation did you bring to your marriage? What can you do now to strengthen that area of your life?
4. For wives: Do you feel that you have a meek and quiet spirit? What can you do to help cultivate it?
5. For husbands: Are you kind and gentle toward your wife? How can you strengthen these traits?
6. How can God's love help you solve the problems in your life? In what ways can that love help you meet life's demands with a gracious spirit?
7. How would you describe your attitude toward your in-laws? In what ways could you give of yourself more sacrificially to improve your relationship with them?