

The Midnight Proposal at the Threshing Floor

RUTH 2:23-3:18; Proverbs 31:10-12, 25, 30-31

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • March 6, 2016

Beloved congregation of Christ: In the old days, a man proposes marriage to the woman he loves by just a simple kneel before her plus a beautiful ring on her finger. Today, men think of all kinds of creative ways to propose. Some make their proposal scuba diving, skydiving, or on top of Mount Everest. Others do it by messages on Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks.

But no other proposal will outdo the marriage proposal in our text today in Chapter 3 of the Book of Ruth. And this was 3,000 years ago! Three features make this proposal unique. First, we know that all proposals are made by men, but in our lesson today, it was Ruth who proposed to Boaz. Second, her proposal was made, of all places, at a threshing floor at the end of harvest time. And third, she proposed not during the day or evening, but at midnight.

Chapter 3 evokes many questions, even from well-meaning pastors and teachers. What was Naomi really thinking when she sent Ruth out to Boaz late at night? What transpired between Ruth and Boaz from midnight till dawn? Did they violate the Seventh Commandment?

Most proposals today actually lead to marriage, but half of these marriages end in divorce. Not so with Ruth and Boaz. The events here in Chapter 3 led to their marriage, and there are temporal and eternal results arising from this “midnight proposal” and subsequent marriage. Today, our theme is, “**The Midnight Proposal at the Threshing Floor**,” under three headings: **first, Proposal Planned: Can't Wait**; **second, Proposal Carried Out: Did They?**; and **third, Proposal Outcome: Can't Wait**.

Proposal Planned: Can't Wait

The last verse of Chapter 1, where Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem just in time for the barley harvest, is a lead to what follows in Chapter 2. Ruth and Boaz meet in his barley field where Ruth was gleaning. So also the last verse of Chapter 2 is a segue to Chapter 3, “*And [Ruth] lived with her mother-in-law.*” The verse focuses on Ruth's lack of a home with a husband. It also implies that Naomi is also thinking about how she will have a child to perpetuate her husband's line through Ruth.

So in the first four verses of Chapter 3, we find Naomi with a solution to these two problems. She says to Ruth, “*My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?*” These are the same words she said to Ruth and Orpah to persuade them to go back to their homes in Moab, “*The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!*” (Ruth 1:9).

When the widows went back to Bethlehem, it was the beginning of the barley harvest after the Passover and First Fruits festivals. The end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest is commemorated at the Feast of Pentecost 50 days later. The wheat harvest lasts another 30-40 days. Verse 23 of Chapter 2 says that Ruth gleaned all through the barley

and wheat harvest, about three months. This whole time, Naomi was hoping that Boaz and Ruth would get together, or at least Boaz would propose to be their kinsman-redeemer.

So Naomi waited and waited for Boaz to move, until she could not wait any longer. She hatched a plan, and told Ruth, “Bathe yourself, put on some perfume, and wear your most beautiful dress. Then go to the threshing floor where Boaz will be winnowing barley, and observe where Boaz lies down for the night. When he has finished eating and drinking with his workers, and is sleeping, lie down at his feet. Then he will tell you what to do next.” Why would Naomi tell Ruth to be her most alluring self and then go lie down at Boaz's feet late at night? It is hard not to conclude what she has in mind. She wanted to force Boaz's hand to assume his kinsman-redeemer's responsibility. “*Is not Boaz our relative?*” she tells Ruth. Some people believe that Naomi was telling Ruth to end her mourning for her husband. But we find no indication of this. As with Job's friends, mourning was usually only seven days.

Perhaps Naomi did not notice that God was working out his plan for her and Ruth. She did not see his perfect timing when they arrived in Bethlehem during the barley harvest. She did not recognize that Ruth “happened” to glean in Boaz's field. She did not grasp why Boaz showed great interest in and kindness to Ruth from the day they met. She couldn't wait, so she will now make a shortcut and take matters into her own hands. Her plan has a few problems though. It is based on the darkness of night, when many “*unfruitful works*” are done “*in secret*” (Eph 5:11-12). She does not include God in her plan. Instead, she presumes that Boaz will act according to the natural passion of a man for a beautiful woman. She actually puts Ruth in physical danger, in addition to putting the couple in danger of committing sexual immorality.

Throughout the Bible, we find people cutting corners because they could not wait. Adam and Eve could not wait for the reward of eternal life for passing their test. Abraham and Sarah could not wait for God to open her womb, so they turned to a slave woman. King Saul could not wait for Samuel, so he unlawfully offered sacrifices himself before a battle.

How often do we also take shortcuts, or not wait, like them? Sometimes, we cut corners in doing our job to make it easier on us, while sacrificing work quality. Parents leave the moral teaching of their children to the church or the school, instead of them teaching at home. Some drown themselves in alcohol and drugs, instead of tackling their problems head-on. Others depend on gambling or the lottery week after week, instead of working diligently with their hands to earn a living.

Many Christians do not go to worship services, Bible studies, prayer meetings, or other church events, cutting corners towards Christian maturity. They think they can be spiritually nourished by just worshipping or studying alone at home or in a coffee shop. Churches are also guilty of taking shortcuts when they perform gimmicks instead of true preaching. Pastors as well tell anecdotes and jokes to fill up their 20 minutes of “preaching.” Even some couples who profess to be Christians do not wait till they are married before they become intimate.

But Ruth and Boaz did not take this shortcut.

Proposal Carried Out: Did They?

So Ruth goes to the threshing floor and does all that Naomi had told her. Her mission is a dangerous one. The end of harvest is celebrated with a feast of food and drink. The men will usually sleep in the field where the grain is heaped. So Boaz, after his heart was “merry” from wine, lay down at the end of the heap of grain, perhaps to keep away from the merriment around him. The Bible says that wine “*gladdens the heart of man*” (Psa 104:15; Eccl 9:7; 10:19). But it can also induce evil and immoral thoughts, as when the Persian king wanted to show off Queen Vashti to his “merry” drunken court (Est 1:10-11). It can also make a man lower his guard, as when David's brother Amnon was killed while his heart was “merry” (2 Sam 13:28).

So it is not surprising that these evening feasts at the end of the harvest season are well-known not only drunkenness, but also for sexual encounters. God condemned Israel for spiritual adultery with this metaphor, “*You have loved a prostitute's wages on all threshing floors*” (Hos 9:1). This verse tells us that sexual encounters were common during harvest celebrations. This is the reason why Boaz told Ruth that night to remain where she was until dawn, but “*before one could recognize another.*” He also said that no one else should know that she was there that night (verse 14).

Boaz, being a worthy man,¹ or a “man of excellence,” honored and respected Ruth. Ruth quietly lay down at the feet of Boaz at the end of the heap of grain. But at midnight, Boaz awoke and was startled to find a woman lying down at his feet. After Ruth introduced herself, she said, “*Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.*” Here is where Ruth did not follow all of Naomi's instructions; Naomi did not tell her to introduce herself in this way. But Ruth was being honest and forthright about her intention.

What did Ruth mean by “*spread your wings over your servant,*” or in some translations, “*spread the corner of your garment over me*” (NIV), or “*spread your skirt over your handmaid*” (NKJV). Some people suggest that “uncovering one's feet” is a metaphor for an intimate contact, but there is no evidence of this in the Bible. The best interpretation is that this is a marriage proposal from Ruth. The best evidence is in Ezekiel 16, where the Lord tells Israel how he found her as an abandoned child, and how the Lord nurtured her to become a beautiful girl. Ezekiel 16:8 uses the same words we find in Ruth 3:9:

When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine.

God tells Israel that she was like an abandoned girl who became a beautiful woman, and whom he married and made a queen. So there was nothing else to Ruth's words except her bold and honest marriage proposal to Boaz. This proposal also evokes Boaz's praise of Ruth as a Moabite who trusted God as her refuge in her difficult situation, “*under whose wings you have come to take refuge!*” (Ruth 2:12) In this proposal, Ruth now calls herself a “*servant,*” but not as a

¹ Hebrew *ish hayil*.

slave who does not have any rights in a household (Ruth 2:13). Ruth now refers to herself as a servant who is a “*handmaid*,” someone who has some rights and privileges, even bearing an heir for her master (Gen 30:3-4; Exo 20:10).

After he heard this proposal, Boaz again prays that the Lord will bless Ruth. She showed kindness to Naomi in supporting her (2:11). And her marriage proposal is “*this last kindness*,” which is greater than the first. She was seeking not only Boaz's material support, but redemption for Naomi's property, and for a husband who would give her a child. Boaz also praised her for desiring to marry him, an older man, instead of going after younger men. Ruth was still young and beautiful, and she could easily find a younger man.

And because of this, Boaz says that Ruth is a “*worthy woman*,” or “*a woman of noble character*,” or “*a woman of excellence*.” All of Bethlehem knew her virtues and excellence. The word for “worthy” is the same word used for the “excellent wife” or the “virtuous wife” of Proverbs 31:10.² In verses 10-31, this woman is described as “an ideal woman - the perfect housewife, the chaste helpmate of her husband, upright, God-fearing, economical, wise.”³ She clothes herself with “*strength and dignity*,” and not with enticing looks (verse 25). Her character is “*praised in the gates*,” so the whole town knows about her fear of the Lord (verses 30-31). And this is the same excellency that Boaz saw in Ruth that night at the threshing floor.

Why would Boaz praise Ruth if she offered her body to Boaz to do as he pleases? Boaz instructed Ruth to “*remain tonight*” until the morning. Does this mean they were sexually intimate? No, for the same word “remain” in this verse is also used by Ruth when she committed to stay with Naomi, “*where you lodge I will lodge*” (Ruth 1:16). This word means nothing else than to stay in a lodging place for the night, as its plain meaning in more than 80 instances in the Old Testament. Did they violate the Seventh Commandment? No, because if they did, both Ruth and Boaz will not be called worthy and excellent.

Dear sisters in Christ, are you an excellent woman? Do you keep yourself sexually pure in your relationships, whether single or married? Are you seeking beauty in appearance, instead of dignity and strength of faith? Do you take to heart what 1 Peter 3:4 says, “*let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious*”? Do you take good and loving care of your husband and children? Do you raise your children up in the nurture and discipline of God? Are you wise in keeping your family's finances, or in your work or business transactions? These are only a few evidences of being an excellent woman like Ruth.

And dear brothers in Christ, as you look at a woman as a prospective wife, is her outward appearance foremost, and not her inner beauty, excellent and noble character? A woman whose wisdom and standard is not of the world, but of heaven, whose priorities in life are heavenly things? Boaz did not pursue Ruth, even after seeing her beauty, but only gave his promise to Ruth after he saw her godliness, excellence, honor, chastity and inner strength.

² Hebrew *eshet hayil*.

³ *The Complete Pulpit Commentary*, vol. 4, Henry Donald Maurice Spence-Jones, ed.

Proposal Outcome: Waiting

So after praising Ruth for her worthiness, Boaz promised her, *“I will do for you all that you ask.”* There were two things that he said he will do. One, he will first ask the other man, who is Naomi's closer relative or kinsman-redeemer. If he was not willing to take his responsibility to be Naomi's redeemer, then Boaz will (Lev 25:48–49; Num 27:11; Deu 25:7-8).

Two, he gave Ruth a token of his promise, a sort of an engagement ring. What was this token? He asked Ruth to hold out her garment, and he poured into it six measures of barley grain. Six measures of barley weighs about 80 pounds! Who among you women can carry an 80-pound load over a considerable distance, from the threshing floor to the city? Ruth was not only beautiful, strong in character, but she was also strong physically. Boaz's promise came with a solemn oath, *“As the Lord lives, I will redeem you.”* Whether it is the closer relative, or himself, who becomes the kinsman-redeemer, Boaz was making sure the two widows will be taken cared of. He was a man of excellence.

We must also note that the author of the book intentionally wrote that Boaz gave Ruth six, not seven, measures of grain. This was probably to point out that this amount of grain is not complete, as the number seven signifies. As the six-day creation was not complete without the seventh day of rest, Ruth's redemption will not be complete until she was finally married to a kinsman-redeemer. As well, the six measures of barley points forward to her greater need and great rest: that of a seed, an offspring, that she does not have thus far.

This is why when Ruth came back to Naomi's house, Naomi said that Boaz *“will not rest but will settle the matter today.”* Ruth then told Naomi that Boaz gave her the huge amount of barley grain so she would not *“go back empty-handed”* to her mother-in-law. Naomi's emptiness and bitterness will soon be reversed. But Naomi told Ruth, *“Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out.”*

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord: Naomi at first could not wait for God to provide for her family, so she allowed her husband to take them outside the Promised Land. After going back to Bethlehem, she could not wait for God to work out their redemption by Boaz, her kinsman-redeemer. She made a plan to take a shortcut, to force the hands of Boaz to take action, even if she was putting Ruth's honor and purity in danger.

Our Lord Jesus Christ knew how to wait for his Father in hope. When he was tempted by the devil, he did not take a shortcut by turning stones into bread or jumping off a cliff and commanding the angels save him. He waited for the right time to reveal himself as the Messiah. Whenever he was tempted to make a shortcut in his mission of redeeming his people from sin, he always said, *“My hour has not yet come.”* Instead, he willingly suffered for three years during his earthly ministry as most people rejected and despised him. As he hung on the cross, he did not take matters into his own hands by destroying his enemies, which he could have done with a word. He can save all his people without dying on the cross with one little word, but at the expense of his Father's righteous justice against sin. He waited upon the Lord, because he

knew that his Father will reward him with all glory, honor and power. That his inheritance is a people from all nations who would believe in him. And on the last day, his waiting will be consummated when he will be the Kinsman-Redeemer of his Bride, the church, all beautiful, pure, and unblemished, *“his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints”* (Rev 19:7-8).

When things in your life look bleak, do you say with the psalmist, *“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope”* (Psa 130:5)? God's promises never fail, and they are worth waiting for. Whether it is for a wife or a husband, for a much-needed job, for a precious child, for relief from pain, for restoration of health, we are to pray, *“But for you, O Lord, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer”* (Psa 38:15). Boaz had wisdom to wait, so she told Ruth, “Wait!” The Lord answered Naomi's impatience with, “Wait!” Waiting for the Lord is rewarded by his faithful answer.

The waiting begins for Naomi and Ruth. But this time, the waiting is very short.