



Spread Your Wings Over Your Servant

No. 3
Series: Ruth

Ruth 3

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Nathan Carter

Text

3 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? ² Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. 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.”

⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. 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. ⁸ At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! 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.” 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. ¹² And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. 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. 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.”

Introduction

It’s graduation season. Harrison Ford recently gave a commencement speech at Arizona State University. In it he said, “[T]he world you’re stepping into – the world my generation left you – is a real mess.” Everybody seems to know that there is something wrong, something amiss with the world. But the last words of Harrison Ford’s address were these – “Go change the world.”

Now those kinds of speeches are wildly popular. There’s a part of us that wants to hear them, wants to believe that we can be the answer to the world’s problems. But I can’t help but wonder if there might be a graduate of Arizona State University that was sitting there who gives a graduation talk in 60 years somewhere that says – “The world

my generation is leaving you is a big mess, but you have the power to change the world!” As long as our world goes on these kinds of humanistic speeches will remain popular.

But do you know what other kind of message has a strange power to resonate, especially among those who get exhausted and jaded by calls for humans to change the world? Proclamations that though we’ve all made a mess of this world, there is a God who is working out a mysterious plan to put things right; good news that it’s not entirely up to us. Stories of redemption still find an audience.

And we’ve been looking at one of those stories that’s been around for over 2,000 years and still has an appeal. It’s an endearing short-story, one of the most beloved of all time that continues to move people deeply. It’s the Hebrew tale of Naomi and Ruth. We know by the title – The Book of Ruth.

It’s a sweet short-story, but it has a bitter beginning. Chapter 1, which we looked at two weeks ago tells the plight of a poor Israelite family during the messed-up days of the judges who flees from a famine only to face the fatalities of the father and his two sons. All that’s left at the end of ch. 1 is an old widow – Naomi – and a young widow – Ruth. They stumble back to Bethlehem, but Naomi says to her old neighbors, “Call me Mara,” which means “bitter.” Her life has been bitter.

So much about life in this world is bitter: sad, full of suffering and seeming hopelessness. As I was working on this section of the sermon I was feeling writer’s block and unwisely picked up my phone and opened Facebook. Yet in God’s kind providence I got a sermon illustration because the first thing I saw on my feed was an announcement that an acquaintance’s wife just got diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. There’s a lot of bitterness in life. The Bible doesn’t ignore that at all. It acknowledges those feelings. And it explains them better than any other religion or philosophy can.

But if ch. 1 could be summed up by the phrase – “bitter providences” (things that happened in God’s sovereignty that were hard to take), ch. 2 is about how even in the midst of the bitterness God brings “sweet providences.” And we’ve all experienced those too, if we’re honest. I was just having lunch with one of you this week and you were telling me how right after your dad died you found yourself on a trip with a believer who previously lost his dad. Stuff like that.

Poor Ruth just *happened* to come to glean in the field of a man named Boaz (2:3). Just *happened*. Nothing just *happens*. Boaz turns out to be a generous and noble man – “a worthy man” (2:1). A lot of men are creeps and would have preyed upon someone disadvantaged like Ruth. But not Boaz. He is a man of character who knows the LORD (2:4). He protects Ruth from being assaulted (2:9, 22). He provides for her with grain (2:14-18). The book of Ruth contains no miracles, have you noticed that? No visions or supernatural revelations. It’s all about how God mostly works mysteriously through the mundane. Yes, there are frowning providences, but though the bud may have a bitter taste, sweet will be the flower for those whose faith is in God.

In 2:20 we learn that Boaz is a close relative of Naomi’s and Ruth’s, a redeemer (Hebrew: *goel*). If you want to see the biblical background for this concept, look at Leviticus 25. There in the Law it spoke about how a close relative could buy back land lost to poverty for the family. This concept of redemption is not about pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. It’s about someone else bailing you out, rescuing you. Boaz could be this redeemer and restore the loss of land and line. But will he? Let’s see what happens in ch. 3.

But first, let's pray...

Narrative

Let's look at the narrative. Chapter 3 follows the same basic structure as ch. 2. It starts at the home with Ruth and Naomi, then follows Ruth to the fields of Boaz, and then ends back at the home with a report of what happened.

We see that there's a spark of hope in Naomi again. She has a plan. And we note that planning is not incompatible with providence. It's okay to try to be part of the answer to your prayers. We read, "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?'" Note that word "rest." Naomi used it earlier back in 1:9 right after Mahlon and Chilion had died and she told Ruth and Orpah – "The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Rest is a spacious, capacious word. It holds room for a wide range of meanings. Rest refers to all that makes life good and stable and right. It connotes repose and tranquility. We all want rest. But life in this world is constantly disturbing our rest. Naomi wanted Ruth to have a home, a place of rest. She wanted her to be well. As it was, she was a vulnerable woman, working as a scavenger, with no husband, no children, no security. Have you ever felt restless? Aren't you really seeking rest? I think that's a key concept in this story.

Verse 2 – "Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were?" Naomi wants Ruth to find a man. We saw in 1 Corinthians, which we just finished going through, that marriage is not automatic for a Christian. With the church as your family, there are many advantages nowadays to singleness. Nevertheless, marriage and childrearing remain a basic human experience that God still calls most people to. Especially in the OT world, marriage and children was expected.

Naomi says, "See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor." Winnowing was a process that happened after the cut crop had dried, where everything was thrown up into the air and the wind separated out the chaff from the stalks from the grain, which was the heaviest and fell pretty much straight back down. The barley threshing usually happened after the wheat had been harvested. So this is probably around "six to eight weeks after the first encounter between Ruth and Boaz, and there seemed to be little progress in their relationship."¹ So Naomi thinks they need a little nudge. You have to be careful with matchmaking, but sometimes a little nudge is helpful.

Naomi gives Ruth some advice – "Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor." Now we may hear this and think that Naomi is suggesting that Ruth fix herself up, put on makeup, dress up: put on a skirt that will turn Boaz's eyes. But I don't think this is calling for immodesty or even accentuating her feminine appeal. In 2 Samuel 12:20 very similar language is used to describe King David after he has been in anguish over the illness of his child. But after the child has died, David decided it was time to move on and so "David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD and worshipped. He then went to his own house." I think the same thing is going on here. Naomi's words "mean that Ruth should end her period of mourning and so signal her return to the normal activities and desires of life, which, of

course, would include marriage.”² So there is a sense in which Naomi is telling Ruth to dress in a way to communicate that she is available, but not in any inappropriate way. It’s just something like – “Stop wearing black as a widow and wear the normal clothing of an unmarried woman.”

Naomi gives more instructions – “[D]o not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 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.” Now, this is weird, right? Let’s all acknowledge that. Part of that weirdness no doubt comes from our cultural distance. There are ancient, cultural customs that we do not understand that make this feel very strange to us. But I think there’s also an awkwardness that we are supposed to feel. The way the narrator is telling this story is meant to create some tension, make us sweat a little while also leaning in with interest.

There is some sexual innuendo. The mention of drinking makes one think about drunken Lot and his daughter in a cave in Genesis 19, the incestuous encounter where the Moabites originally came from. “[T]he author packs his prose with erotic double entendres.”³ The verb “uncover” is often used in sexual contexts. Similarly, the word “lie” has those same undertones. And sometimes the word “feet” can be used as a euphemism for genitals. What exactly is Naomi asking Ruth to do here??!

Ruth “replied, ‘All that you say I will do.’ So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. 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.” It’s been a long day of work. But it’s been a joyous time of plenty. Boaz has a big pile of freshly threshed grain. To prevent any theft, he sleeps beside it to guard it.

But Ruth is lurking in shadows, watching, waiting to make her move so she can have a private conversation. From a distance she sees Boaz lay down and fall asleep. “Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down.” Have your sheets every come untucked from your bed and your feet get exposed and it wakes you up in the middle of the night? Well, the strategy worked here for Boaz. “At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet!” It’s kind of funny. Can you imagine it?

“Given the spiritual climate in the period of the judges, an average Israelite might have welcomed the night visit of a woman, interpreting her presence as an offer of sexual favors,” points out Daniel Block, “but not so Boaz.”⁴ “He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant [that girl that has been gleaning in your field.]’ And then she says something very interesting. She says, “Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” “Wings” means the corner of your blanket. Uh.... But if you look at places like Ezekiel 16:8 you’ll see that spreading the corner of your garment over someone was essentially a symbol of betrothal. It would be the equivalent of giving someone an engagement ring. Ruth is asking Boaz to propose.

This scene is sexually charged on purpose. It’s written to make us squirm a little, but then we see that nothing immoral happens! There is only virtue on display! On all sides. Boaz is virtuous. He’s not drunk. He isn’t looking for sex. And “as a woman of character Ruth wanted to make her intentions clear right from the outset. Her goal was a commitment to marriage, not a single night of passion,” as one person has put it.⁵ She doesn’t want to hook up. She wants a man who will marry her and be her kinsman redeemer.

And Boaz is impressed. 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.” What does this mean? It means that Ruth has not thrown off the mourner’s clothes and put herself back on the market in search of someone young and good looking or rich. She’s not interested in marrying merely for passion or for money. She’s marrying for a higher purpose. This is something for all the single people here today to keep in mind. Don’t look for a mate that fits some worldly category of compatibility or is just fun in the moment, but someone that you can link up with to live for the kingdom of God. Ruth doesn’t put herself out there for just anyone. She’s letting her kinsman redeemer know that she is open to marriage to him so that he can redeem Naomi’s ancestral land and potentially even carry on the line of Elimelech. Her first act of remarkable *hesed* (loving kindness) was leaving her homeland and idols to go with Naomi and Naomi’s God. This second act of kindness is even more exemplary. She wants to marry for a higher purpose than just her individual pleasure. Boaz is blown away. This is true beauty – a woman of character and faithfulness and who isn’t living for herself or superficial things, but something bigger and grander.

Ruth takes a risk here. She sticks her neck out there. She could have been rejected or shamed or misunderstood. Dating is pretty nerve-racking business, isn’t it? But Boaz reassures her – “And now, my daughter [he must have been a somewhat older bachelor], do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.” Chapter 2 began with a description of Boaz as a worthy man. Here Ruth’s reputation of being a worthy woman is stated. That is what attracts him to her and her to him. This story has all these worries of being R rated, but it turns out to be PG. It’s not a repeat of Judah and Tamar of Genesis 38. She’s not like the Moabite women who seduced Israel in Numbers. Boaz and Ruth are upright and godly and self-controlled, the model relationship (even if the exact details of how this went down I wouldn’t necessarily recommend to the single people in the church today).

But not so fast. Boaz, the man of integrity that he is has to be honest. He knows something. He says, “And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. 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.” One scholarly observer writes, “From a story-telling point of view, this has the marvelous effect of creating one more suspenseful moment, in which Boaz is given his opportunity to show his worthiness; for it is one feature of Boaz’s valor that he will not even usurp another man’s right to act responsibly!”⁶

“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’. He was trying to protect her reputation in the moment, but now we all know! “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.” This is extremely generous. The text doesn’t specify the unit of measurement, but if it is six seahs, then it would equal around 80 pounds. Ruth is strong woman, but no doubt waddling back with a huge load in her shawl. This is also extremely symbolic. It’s a pledge. Six, not seven, not the number of fulfillment. And the image of a man pouring seed into a woman’s clothing that she carries out in front of her is, let’s say, pregnant with anticipation.

“Then she went into the city. 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, saying, ‘These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said, “You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.”’” Do you recognize that word “empty?” At the end of ch. 1 Naomi exclaimed, “I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.” But here Ruth’s words to Naomi reflect how the LORD has replenished her, has addressed her emptiness. The LORD restores, he fills. Whatever you feel like you’ve lost, he is able to make up for.

Naomi replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.” There’s that key word again – “rest.” The chapter began and ended on it. This is a story about a lack of rest, a need for rest, and a man who will not rest until he obtains it for Ruth, and by extension for Naomi too. It’s a story about emptiness, and man who acts to fill it.

Doctrine

Let’s continue to step back and see what this story is really teaching us. We see themes of emptiness and filling. We see the word “rest” bookending this chapter. But right at the center of this chapter we see something that pulls it all together. Ruth says to Naomi in v. 9 – “Spread your wings over your servant.” We pointed out that this is a reference to the edges of a garment and it signified a covenantal commitment to marriage. But there’s something even deeper going on here. “Wings,” where have we heard that before?

Back in ch. 2, v. 12 Boaz pointed out how Ruth had taken refuge under the wings of the LORD, the God of Israel. She had thrown herself on his mercy, found rest in his arms, sought refuge under his covering. The LORD was her husband who filled up her deepest longings. Ultimately, the rest and refuge and re-filling that we all desperately need is found in a relationship with the LORD. That is true. That is the underlying reality of this story.

So then why does Ruth ask Boaz to spread his wings over her? God is enough in himself. Knowing him can sweeten even the most bitter situations. Our ultimate hope is not in land or legacy or money or a nice house or a romantic relationship. But God will often use those things to show us his love and care. In short, I think the main point we are supposed to see in Ruth 3 is just this: **God gives his people tangible pictures of his provision.** Or you could put it this way: **God gives his people physical reminders of his redemption.** Or you could say it this way: **God gives his people signposts that point us to our ultimate home in him.**

Application

Marriage is a major one, a massively significant **signpost**. This is what Ephesians 5 says. Marriage is a picture of Christ and his church. You don’t have to get married to see it; you can observe it in others’ marriages. But if you do get married it can be a powerful way that God can show his love to you. But just remember: it’s a picture. It’s a means to an end. If a marriage becomes an end in itself, it will be bitter. But if you see marriage as a gift to bolster your faith in the Giver, it will be sweet. Marriages don’t last for eternity. Therefore, they are made to prepare you for eternity. You can pray for a spouse. You can even do things that put you in the pathway of a potential spouse. God

can show his provision to you through a spouse, but remember: “your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called” (Is. 54:5). He’s the One who neither slumbers nor sleeps in order to keep you (cf. Ps. 121:4).

That’s the reality. But sometimes those truths can be hard to grasp, to feel, to experience when they are just spiritual. Growth and maturity involves deepening our spiritual perceptiveness. But God knows we need help.

So God gives his people tangible pictures of his provision. Sometimes that’s through sweet providences. Be on the lookout for them. There are no such things as coincidences in God’s world. God is orchestrating all things, and sometimes he will just make it abundantly clear that he’s looking out for you through obvious, sweet providences. You can learn to see them almost everyday if you train your eye. But some days are just unmistakable. I had one of those recently when I was feeling really low. There are too many providences to share that were condensed in this day, but I was supposed to have a meeting with some people in one place and last minute they asked to move it to another place. Because of that I got to meet several people that I had been intending to meet with but God lined things up. Then a guy walked in to use the bathroom and saw me and said, “I had just been planning to text you!” And so we got to meet and pray together over something heavy at the exact time that my daily alarm went off to pray for that thing. Then I was walking to my car and saw someone wearing a shirt that said, “Set your mind on things above.” I was pondering that when I looked down at my phone and had a text from a friend that said, “I just prayed Colossians 3:1-4 over you this morning.” Nothing just happens. God will give you these kind providences to show you he’s there and he cares and he’s orchestrating all things for your eternal good.

The **signposts** are everywhere once you start training your eyes. Spring flowers. Sunny days. Green foliage. The smell of cooking that reminds you of your childhood. The skyline. The lake. A cup of coffee. A friendship. There’s a song from the 90s by Jump, Little Children that has this line – “In the cathedrals of New York and Rome, there is a feeling that you should just go home, and spend a lifetime finding out just where that is.” Where is home? Music, architecture, literature, nature, culture, humor, leisure, pleasure... it can all be God’s ways of showing you his love and drawing your heart to him for your ultimate source of rest, refuge, and redemption; safety and security. If you’re not yet a Christian, he can use those things to awaken you to faith. And if you are his child, part of his Bride, he uses these things to solidify your faith.

If you can’t remember or see those **tangible pictures of his provision** in your life right now, you can listen to testimonies of others. Most importantly, we have inspired stories like this one in Ruth that we can take comfort from – Scripture.

And the greatest story that all the other stories in the Bible direct us to is the flesh and blood Redeemer – Jesus Christ. Apart from him we are lost, destitute, enslaved to sin, exiled from his presence, without hope and without a home. But in the incarnation God has become our kinsman, a fellow human. And he is infinitely rich. And he is more than willing. He lamented over Jerusalem – “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing” (Lk. 13:34).

But to those who felt their need and boldly came to him and sought refuge in him, he welcomed and embraced them, especially women. One time “a woman who had

suffered... for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment [the wings of his cloak], for she said to herself, ‘If I only touch his garment, I will be made well.’ Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, ‘Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.’ And instantly the woman was made well” (Mt. 9:20-22). Boldly come to Jesus and ask him to take you in and he will!

In fact, he invites you. He says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30). He is the only answer for all the bitterness of this world. He is the only one who can fill up your emptiness. He is the only one who can give you final rest. He is the only one under whose wings you can find lasting refuge. He is the ultimate Redeemer.

The Lord’s Table

And again, that can feel intangible, hard to hold onto sometimes. And so he **gives his people physical reminders of his redemption**, like this bread and this wine. Physical, tangible, signs and seals of his love for you. You can hold them, feel them, see them, smell them, taste them, hear them crunch... and know that Christ’s body was crushed and his blood was shed to redeem you, to pay the price to buy you back, to rescue you from the consequences of your sin, and to bring you into full fellowship with him...

And he gives you the church, a physical tangible demonstration of his reality and love. As we take these physical emblems, look around at the physical family that God has given you in Christ as yet another token of his love...

Benediction

“O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption” (Ps. 130:7)!

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, May 17, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ Iain M. Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2005), 170.

² K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 459.

³ This is a quote from a commentary, but I lost the reference.

⁴ Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC (Brentwood: B&H, 1999), 690.

⁵ Duguid, 172.

⁶ E.F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 137.