

Introduction

I have four lovely ladies in my family and three of them love terrible movies. By this I mean the cheesy rom-coms—romantic comedies. You know the story: boy meets girl and there is both instant like and instant disdain. The boy or the girl is entangled in some sort of “innocent” deception or maybe a poor choice, only to discover their *true* feelings for one another and finally admit it and, well, they love happily ever after. You know, romance, longing, terrible dialogue, improbable situations.

Love stories are nothing new; they’ve been around for a very long time. And we all know true love is the greatest thing in the world. Except for a nice MLT—a mutton, lettuce, and tomato sandwich, where the mutton is nice and lean and the tomato is ripe. They’re so perky. I love that.

My wife gave me a list of the sort of movies they love, and I recognized titles of only a few on the list. They love movies like “Sleepless in Seattle”, “While You Were Sleeping”, “Leap Year”, “27 Dresses”, “10 Things I Hate About You”, “My Best Friend’s Wedding”, “Say Anything”, “The Proposal”, “13 Going On 30”, and of course, the greatest romantic comedy of all time, “The Princess Bride”.

What makes “The Princess Bride” so great is that while it is a love story, it’s also an action flick and a fairy tale and a fantasy movie—complete with giants and fire swamps and miracle men and ROUSes (Rodents of Unusual Size), and of course, lots of sword-fighting. It’s a thriller and a heist, and it’s an adventure story, while also being a comedy. Oh, and it features a pro wrestler.

After several months digging through the muck of the book of Judges, we find ourselves in the book of Ruth, which is a love story. Though it is set in the time of the judges, we see in this the perfect love story, but not because the characters are perfect or because their actions are perfect. It is the perfect love story because of who wrote the story and how it reveals and reflects the character of God. We are in Ruth 3 this morning.

Ruth 3:1 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? 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.”

Ruth 3:1–18

The Plan Concocted

After finishing the barley and then the wheat harvests, the time to thresh and winnow the grain had come. First the grains had to be knocked loose from the stalk—that’s threshing, and then the grain had to be separated from the chaff—that’s winnowing. This was a time of celebration for it meant food for the coming year.

The barley harvest typically began around the time of Passover in the spring. In Israel winter is the growing season and harvest is in the spring. June, July, and August, which we associate with the growing season, are the driest months in Israel and so are a terrible time to grow crops. Instead, December, January, and February are typically the rainiest months and so crops grow. Passover is in the spring and so it’s associated with the beginning of the harvest season.

After the barley was harvested the wheat would be ready to harvest. Wheat was the more valuable crop as it made for better bread. Barley came to represent the essentials for survival while wheat was linked to abundance and blessing. You could *survive* with barley; you could *thrive* with wheat.

These harvests occurred during the Feast of Weeks. The seven weeks after Passover were the Feast of Weeks, one of Israel’s annual festivals. It began the Sabbath day after Passover and continued for seven full weeks—49 days. After the Feast of Weeks—on the fiftieth day—was Pentecost. It was the celebration of another year of God’s provision and blessing.

Because this year’s crops were so abundant, the barley harvest went right into the wheat harvest. Ruth was invited to harvest alongside Boaz’s workers through both harvests, glean-

ing as much as she desired. As we saw last week, the generosity of the Lord was on display through Boaz as Ruth worked hard and diligently and was blessed abundantly. Rather than stick to the *letter* of the law, Boaz fulfilled the *spirit* of the law and blessed Ruth, a foreigner.

After the harvests were gathered, it was time for threshing and winnowing. Naomi has hatched a plan to provide for Ruth. Remember, Ruth was her daughter-in-law, the widow of her son Mahlon. Both her sons and her husband had died and so Naomi only had Ruth, and they were poor. They were poor, that is, until Boaz blessed them. Naomi has a plan for the future.

In verse 1 she tells Ruth that the time has come for her to “seek rest” for Ruth, that life may go well with her. Having left behind her family in Moab and without a husband or father-in-law to look after her, it falls to Naomi. When Boaz blessed Ruth in chapter 2, reminding her she had come to take refuge under the wings of the God of Israel, he understood that God often uses means. That is, like Naomi, he understood the role a husband would play in providing that refuge.

When Naomi says she is seeking rest for Ruth, this is what she means: Ruth needs a husband. Naomi’s plan involves Boaz. Boaz is a relative, a “redeemer”. In ancient Israel if land had to be sold due to poverty or some other disaster, a redeemer was a close relative who could purchase that land, that it might stay in the family. Naomi is combining it with the idea of Levirate marriage: providing heirs for a man without sons. She wants Boaz, a relative of her dead husband, to redeem the land and even more, to marry Ruth.

She points out Boaz is winnowing barley that night at the threshing floor. This is already a bad plan. Threshing floors were generally community property. They were often built on the side of a hill on a large, flat, rocky space. The rocky surface could be swept clean and the threshed grain could be winnowed, which simply involves tossing it into the air so that the wind would blow away the chaff and the grains would fall straight down where they could be swept up.

The problem is threshing floors were places of great immorality. Because men would congregate at threshing floors during and after harvest, prostitutes would also congregate there at night. Centuries after Ruth the prophet Hosea wrote about this practice.

Hos 9:1 Rejoice not, O Israel! Exult not like the peoples; for you have played the whore, forsaking your God. You have loved a prostitute’s wages on all threshing floors.

Hosea 9:1

Naomi’s plan is for Ruth to go to Boaz at the threshing floor. This is a bad idea. She tells her in verse 3 to wash herself and anoint herself. She is to make herself clean and pretty. She is to put on a cloak. The word for cloak means “outer garment”. It appears to be for the purpose of concealing her identity. She must not make herself known to Boaz right away. She is to wait until she finds where he will sleep and then go to him after he falls asleep. *It’s a terrible plan.*

She further tells Ruth that after Boaz falls asleep she should uncover his feet. The reader who understands the language would be shocked at this. It is intended to be highly suggestive. To uncover the feet could mean *uncover the feet* or it could mean to expose him. The text is intentionally ambiguous! The plan is when Boaz wakes up—and he will—he will

give the right instructions to Ruth. Y'all. *This is a terrible plan.* If Ruth were vulnerable simply by being in the fields working, why on earth should she be in such a place *at night*?

The Plan Enacted

In verse 6 we're told Ruth gets all gussied up and went to the threshing floor. She was hidden under her cloak but though this takes place during the time of the judges and given what often happened at threshing floors, no one paid attention to her. See the hand of God in this. This is a terrible plan and can place Ruth in great danger, yet God protects her and shelters her in spite of this very bad plan.

In verse 7 Ruth sees Boaz has eaten and "his heart was merry". He's not intoxicated. Boaz has the sense of profound well-being at the generosity of the Lord. After years of famine it was a good harvest.

It just so happens that he lay down to sleep "at the end of the heap of grain". Boaz is away from the others, who would have also stayed there. They were guarding the grain. He's positioned away from the others and on the side of potential danger. If anyone sought to steal grain, they would find Boaz there, guarding it—on the front line, so to speak. He places himself in the position of greatest danger!

After he fell asleep Ruth cautiously approached him and, well, uncovered his feet. Again, we're left wondering what this means. The narrator is being intentionally vague. Old Testament scholar Daniel Block points out there were three possible outcomes of this. At some point Boaz's *feet* would become chilled and he would wake up to discover a woman next to him.

First, Boaz could interpret this discovery as an offer for sex. In an immoral world this would be quite expected, especially in the time of the judges. Boaz, however, was not that sort of Israelite—and Naomi knew this. Chapter 2 describes him as "a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech". Naomi is confident Boaz will not take advantage of her. It's still not a good plan.

The second option is he could reject Ruth for acting like a prostitute. Her approach would certainly give off such vibes and Boaz, being a good man, may well have rejected her outright for such unseemly behavior. As I mentioned, this is a terrible plan! She's an unmarried woman and a foreigner and she comes stealthily in the night. The reader would expect a righteous man to reject such advances. Block goes on to explain the third option.

Third, Boaz could recognize immediately the intended meaning of Ruth's actions, and respond favorably to her. Either of the first two responses would have defeated Naomi's purpose, and rather than securing Ruth's welfare, this Moabite woman would have returned home broken in body and bruised in spirit. From a natural perspective, the desired response was the least probable. It was unlikely that Boaz would wake up and in the dark and in his groggy state notice that Ruth had dressed herself in her finest garment (שְׂמֹלֶה), rather than the seductive garb of a prostitute; that he would be sympathetic when she introduced herself; that he would overlook the irregularities of the situation (a woman proposing to a man, a younger person proposing to an older, a field worker proposing to the field owner, an alien proposing to a native); and that, in fulfillment of Naomi's

last words, he would give Ruth rational instructions on how to proceed. But by this time Naomi appeared confident in Boaz' integrity, and in the hidden hand of God to govern his reactions when he awoke.

Daniel I. Block, ZECOT

While it was a terrible plan, it was rooted firmly in faith in Boaz and even more, in the Lord. If you are single, please do not see this as a viable means of finding a spouse! That is not what this is! Rather, what we're seeing is God's providence on display. God is moving among his people to accomplish his purposes, and the incredible thing is he can cause all things to work together for good—even our terrible plans!

After uncovering Boaz's feet, Ruth lay next to him. Around midnight Boaz woke up with, apparently, cold feet. He noticed a woman next to him and he surely had questions. He asked, "Who are you?" When he first encountered Ruth he asked, "*Whose* young woman is this?" He now asks her directly: who are *you*?

She responds calmly and directly: "I am Ruth, your servant". This is not the word for slave. When she first met Boaz she said she was a servant, though not one of *his* servants. This is not the same word. She knows who she is. In chapter 2 she was a servant of lowest rank. Here she identifies herself as a servant, but as one who could be elevated to the status of *wife*. This is why she immediately says, "Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer".

This is a marriage proposal. Because it was understood that a husband provided a covering for his wife, that is, a husband would protect and shelter and provide for his wife, by asking him to spread his wings over her, she is asking to be his wife. Thus we see she did not come to him gussied up like a prostitute, but like a *bride*.

The Engagement

Boaz once again responds to her with a blessing. May Ruth be blessed by YHWH the God of Israel. He says in verse 10 she has made *this* kindness greater than the first. What was the first? When he first met Ruth he told her to stay in his fields where she would be safe and well-cared for. She asked why he should take notice of her, a foreigner? He said this:

Ruth 2:11 But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹² The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"

Ruth 2:11–12

Ruth's first kindness was her love and faithfulness to Naomi. He then calls upon the Lord to bless Ruth, for she has come under the Lord's wings for refuge. When she proposes marriage to him, he recognizes the kindness extended to him, for she did not pursue younger, more virile men—of any socio-economic status. He tells Ruth what everyone knew to be true: she is a worthy woman.

Boaz chooses option three. He is a good man, a righteous man, and will not take advantage of her, though they are hidden from view. He will not reject her for being a foreigner, or for being so very forward in her marriage proposal. He would marry her. He acknowledges he is a redeemer, a close relative who could purchase the land of the late Elimelech and restore it to the family name. This is Boaz, however. His integrity is on full display, for instead of grasping for what is not rightfully his, he acknowledges there is one other relative who has a prior claim to be the redeemer. If he is willing, Ruth must let him redeem, but if not, Boaz will redeem *her*.

Interestingly he sees the real prize here is not the land but the woman. He swears by the Lord if the other relative will not redeem *her*, he will redeem the land and take her as his wife. He then tells her to stay there until morning.

It's unlikely that either of them slept. It's just as unlikely that they did anything other than whisper quietly in the night. Before the sun came up she got up to return home with his promise to pursue a marriage with her. Notice his concern for her reputation in verse 15: "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor". He may have said this to himself or he may have said this to his closest men. Either way, women came there all the time, and they were not good women. Ruth is a good woman. He does not want her reputation sullied, so he tells her to spread out her cloak. He then fills it with grain, which serves two purposes.

First, it provides a reason for Ruth to have been there. He gave her six scoops, which some estimate to be 50–85 pounds of grain. That's a lot of grain! Once again we see his generosity, not only in the amount but the purpose of the grain. If anyone recognizes her returning to the city they will see the large amount of grain she is struggling to carry and won't think twice about where she had been—or why.

Second, it's a gift to Naomi. The land to be redeemed was her husband's land. In verse 17 Ruth said he told her she must not go back to Naomi empty-handed. He understands that marrying Ruth is about more than Ruth. It is about God's loving-kindness and his mercy to all, especially to the poor and the widow. By sending Ruth home with such a substantial amount of grain, he's telling Naomi he will take care of her and provide for *her*.

In verse 16, when Naomi sees Ruth, she asks, "How did you fare, my daughter?" The question is more literally, "Who are you, my daughter?" She's asking how it went, but by asking Ruth's identity. Are you Ruth...or are you the soon-to-be *Mrs. Boaz*? How did it go? *How did you fare*? Given the amount of grain she's carrying and likely the big ol' smile on Ruth's face, it should be obvious.

Naomi already knows the answer. Her question, "How are you?", is like saying to someone who just won the PowerBall, "I heard you just won some *gas money*!" Boaz didn't want her to return to Naomi empty-handed, so he gave her so much she struggled to carry it home. It would be the last time she struggled.

Before asking the question, Naomi knew the answer. She confidently tells Ruth to wait there rather than return to help with the threshing and winnowing. The matter will be settled soon. And while we're waiting, *tell me everything*.

Hesed

What we're seeing in this text is *hesed*—*God's kindness*. The Hebrew word is difficult to translate. It may be the hardest word to translate into English in the entire Bible. In verse 10 it's rendered "kindness". Centuries ago a word was made up to try to capture its meaning in English: "lovingkindness". It combines the ideas of love and loyalty and *action*. We see it in God's self-revelation to Moses.

Ex 34:6 The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and
faithfulness,
Exodus 34:6

The Lord abounds in *steadfast love*—*hesed*. Throughout Psalm 136 is the repeated phrase, "for his *steadfast love* endures forever". This steadfast love, this *hesed*, is covenantal. God's steadfast love is directly tied to his covenant-keeping character:

Deut 7:9 Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God
who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his
commandments, to a thousand generations,
Deuteronomy 7:9

What keeps God from abandoning those who otherwise deserve to be left behind is his *hesed*, his steadfast love, his covenant loyalty, his *kindness* to us in Christ. As the psalmist put it,

Ps 103:10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according
to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is
his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
Psalm 103:10–11

Rather than deal with us according to our sins, what does the Lord do? He pours out his steadfast love. His kindness is what fills our cup and as Psalm 23 says, causes it to overflow. We see his kindness throughout Scripture, for it is a significant part of who God *is*. God *is* love. His covenant faithfulness is not a response to his people but an outflow of who he is. This is the point God was making in Exodus 34.

Moses asked to *see* his glory. What a bold request! Show me the thing that is your glory. Show me what makes you glorious! God's response was profound. His glory is this: I am YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. This is what makes God glorious. It is more than what he *does*; it is who he *is*.

Everything we read in this book is the outflow of God's incredible, profound kindness. Did anyone in Israel deserve his mercy and grace? Did any earn his steadfast love? No! They deserved for him to deal with them according to their sins, and repay them according to their iniquities, but did he? No! He is pouring out kindness on Ruth, a woman from *Moab*.

Think of her origin story. Back in Genesis 19 Lot had two daughters. After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah Lot's wife died. His daughters got him so drunk he had no idea what they did to him and with him. The result was the older daughter had a son and named him *Moab*. From him came the Moabites.

We saw early in the book of Judges that Eglon, king of Moab, was oppressing Israel. God raised up Ehud to deliver Israel from Moab. This was early in Israel's history in the land. This was not ancient history in Ruth's day, but fairly recent history. Though she was a Moabite and not a descendant of Abraham, and though this means she was a citizen of an enemy of Israel, God poured out kindness on Ruth.

In his loving care he ensured she married Mahlon. Then when Mahlon died he ensured she would return to the land of Israel with Naomi. In his loving kindness God led her to make that profound declaration of commitment to Naomi and to the God of Israel back in chapter 1. Naomi's people had become her people and Naomi's God had become her God.

Boaz functions in our text as a *type* of Christ, as one who foreshadows the King who is coming. Whereas the judges were largely dark shadows of the coming King, Boaz was an excellent representation of him who was to come. We see this in Ruth's proposal to him. While her proposing to Boaz is a bit odd, the truth is she was not the one initiating the relationship. Through her proposal God was answering the prayer of Boaz back in chapter 2!

Ruth 2:12 The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"

Ruth 2:12

In response to her proposal, Boaz accepts the responsibility and begins to become the answer to his own request for her blessing! Ruth didn't initiate this relationship; she responded to who Boaz is and what he had been doing for her and for Naomi. It is because of the man he is that she *responds* to his character by asking to be his wife. While from our perspective it may appear she is the one initiating the relationship, the unusual proposal is actually a response to Boaz and his kindness and generosity, his *hesed*.

Application

This love story between Boaz and Ruth is the story of Christ and the church. Paul revealed something profound in Ephesians 5. He said marriage is a mystery. The Latin word for this is sacrament. It means something that God gives that reveals what is happening behind the scenes. Communion and baptism are sacraments; they are a visual and tangible revelation of what is happening in the spiritual realm. Marriage is such a revelation. Through marriage God is revealing something profound about Christ and the church.

Paul refers specifically to the act of marriage. The intimacy between husband and wife reveals the intimacy we have with the Lord. Just as Ruth's proposal was a response to Boaz's initiating love, so our faith in Christ is a response to God's initiating love. As Peter put it, we love him because he first loved us. We cry out to him in faith for salvation, but this "proposal" for rescue is but our response to his initiating love and *hesed*.

We all want to be part of a love story. I don't mean romantic love, like some silly rom-com. If you enjoy that, great. What I mean is each one of us wants love, to be truly loved as we are. We all want to be better, but we long for love and acceptance. Even the hardest of hearts wants love and acceptance.

If you are in Christ, you are included in the greatest love story ever. Don't get me wrong; I love being married, but marriage is, at its best and most pure, still between two sinners who live in a broken and fallen world. The best of marriages is still a distortion of what God intended to be holy.

Ruth gloriously displays God's *hesed* that he pours out on his people in her love and faithfulness to Naomi, and in the later act of kindness in proposing to Boaz. When Boaz accepts, remember that he sent a gift back to Naomi, for he understood this marriage was about more than a love story between Ruth and himself. Similarly, God's *hesed* isn't poured out on an individual, but on his church. His entire bride is affected by his love and faithfulness. When he gives a gift to one, it is always intended to be a gift to all. This is why you are the gift given to the church!

Unfortunately too many churches act like Bridezilla, and make everything about them. Like a self-centered bride they want everything to be about them. They want the attention. They want the opulence. They want the control. They want the show. Life—*worship*—becomes about them and their desires and has little to do with the covenantal union God offers according to his *hesed*.

The true bride understands her role. She responds to her Redeemer. She asks him to spread his wings over his servant, to embrace her with love and commitment and goodness and faithfulness and loyalty and mercy and devotion and favor and steadfast love—with *hesed*!

Like Ruth we must recognize our need to be redeemed, to be rescued, to be *loved*. We humbly place ourselves under his wings and follow him wherever he leads, never trying to usurp him and his leadership over us. We follow him without grumbling and complaining. We do this, and like Ruth, we glean a harvest of righteousness that is overflowing. We continue reaping his *hesed*.

When we respond to who God is and to what he has done for us, we submit ourselves to him fully and completely. We rest under his wings where we are loved and protected, where God pours out his covenant faithfulness on us. The good news in this is because God's love is an initiating love, it isn't based on us. God's love is based entirely in who he is.

What keeps God from abandoning those who otherwise deserve to be left behind is his *hesed*, his steadfast love, his covenant loyalty, his faithfulness, his mercy, his *kindness* to us in Christ. Whatever road you're walking, whatever hardship comes your way, whether health problems or financial problems or relational problems or just your daily struggle with sin, rest under his wings. He is faithful. He has promised that since his love initiated the covenant with us, he will be faithful to bring that work to completion. Whatever comes our way we can endure because we are under his wings.