

A Bold Proposal (Part 4)
Ruth
Ruth 3:1-18
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As we were singing that song together, I couldn't help but think that as we talk about the Lord's speaking to us through His Word. Sometimes we can look at the stories of the Scripture, and they seem so far removed in time and space from us that it's hard for us to see immediately the connection. I guess the question is this. As we turn tonight to the book of Ruth again how can a story, a true-life story that occurred now over 3000 years ago, speak to the issues of our lives?

I want to start (if you've already turned to Ruth keep your finger there), but I want you to turn first to Romans 15. Romans 15. Here the apostle Paul reminds us of this very reality. Romans 15 and notice verse 4. "For whatever was written in earlier times" [obviously a reference to the Scripture] "... was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." That's what we learn from a 3000-year-old story. It was written for our instruction so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures today, in our lives, in our circumstances, in the issues with which we battle we have hope. So, with that I want you to turn back with me to the book of Ruth.

So far as we have looked at the dramatic story of Ruth, it unfolds as we've noted in a series of acts. A series of sort of changes of scenes and acts that we watch the drama unfold. It begins as I noted for you, and we've noted a number of times with Act 1 with the first five verses of this little book, and we called it "The Far Country." Because Ruth's story begins (if you'll notice verse 1 of this little book), "It came about in the days when the judges governed that there was a famine in the land." Ruth's story begins in the dark period of the judges during a time of desperate famine. And it begins with the disastrous choice of one Jewish family. Verse 1 tells us that "a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons."

Elimelech, with his apparent agreement of his wife, Naomi, decides to move his family, his Jewish family out of the land of promise into Moab, into a land filled with Israel's enemies, a

land filled with the idolatrous worship of Chemosh, the false god of the Moabites who demanded child sacrifice. This was in the end a disastrous even a rebellious choice. Instead of staying in the land and praying with the people for God's forgiveness for the sin that had brought on the drought, that had brought on the famine, they decide to dodge it and to leave. The author goes on to document the divine consequences of their rebellion in verses 3 - 5.

Within 10 years' time, this family not only experienced the famine in their own country and the parents' sinful decision to move away into a pagan land of idol worship, but in that same 10 years there was the unexpected death of Elimelech, Naomi's young husband. Their two boys married idolatrous women, women who worshiped Chemosh. And both of Naomi's sons went on to be married 10 years without children. And finally, at the end of that 10 years both of the sons died prematurely and unexpectedly. In the far country, away from God, away from obedience to God they experienced nothing but God's chastening hand.

So, after 10 years in the next act Naomi decides to return to Israel. Act 2 is the journey home. This section details the remarkable story of the repentance and the spiritual restoration of Naomi. She says I went out full, and God has brought me back empty. She said the hand of God in affliction has been upon my life. She was saying God has disciplined me.

But it also details the remarkable story of the salvation of her daughter-in-law, Ruth, a story of sovereign grace. Here is a woman in the most unlikely of circumstances that God reaches down into the middle of idolatrous Moab and snatches to Himself. The focus of these verses is not Ruth, it's not Naomi. As with the entire book of Ruth the real Hero of the story is Yahweh. Yahweh demonstrates Himself to be a savior. In this act, Act 2, by restoring the land from drought and famine to food, by restoring Naomi from sin to repentance, and by converting Ruth from idolatry to salvation.

Now the last time that we studied Ruth together, we finished chapter 2 and the third act which is Yahweh's protection and provision. The key verse in the second chapter is 2:12. Look at it with me. Here is Boaz's prayer for Ruth. "May the LORD ..." may Yahweh "... reward your work and your wages be full from [Yahweh] ..., the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to

seek refuge.” Both of these women, Naomi and Ruth, had sought refuge in Yahweh under His wings. Naomi had repented, returned to her God. Ruth, the Moabitess, who had worshiped Chemosh her entire life, now believes in Yahweh, Israel’s God, the one true and living God. And since they had sought refuge in Him, Yahweh takes it as His personal mission to care for them. He assumed complete responsibility for their care so in chapter 2 we learn that through His providence God always cares for those who have sought refuge in Him. And we watched Him do it in remarkable ways in chapter 2.

Now tonight we come to the fourth Act in this real-life drama. The fourth Act. Let’s read it together Ruth 3. And I want to read the entire chapter. I had the ridiculous idea that I might make it through all 18 verses tonight. That quickly it became obvious that wasn’t going to happen. But I will read the whole thing, alright, so you see it in the flow of the context. You follow along as I read Ruth 3.

Then Naomi, her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? Now is not Boaz, our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight. Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your *best* clothes, and go down to the threshing floor; *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, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you shall do.” She said to her, “All that you say I will do.” So she went down to the threshing floor and [she] did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came secretly, and uncovered his feet and lay down. It happened in the middle of the night that the man was startled and bent forward; and behold, a woman was lying at his feet. He said, “Who are you?” She answered, “I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative.” Then he said, “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. 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. Now it is true [that] 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.”

So she lay at his feet until morning and rose before one could recognize another; and he said, “Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.” Again he said, “Give me the cloak that is on you and hold it.” So she held it, and he measured six *measures* of barley and laid *it* on her. Then she went into the city. When she came to her mother-in-law, she said, “How did it go, my daughter?” And she told her all that the man had done for her. She said, “These six *measures* of barley he gave to me, for he said, ‘Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’” 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 theme of this chapter of this fourth act is this: In His providence God uses wise plans carried out in obedience to His Word to provide for the future of those who seek refuge in Him. Let me say that again. God uses in His providence wise plans carried out in obedience to His Word to provide for the future of those who seek refuge in Him. Again, the hero of this chapter is not Naomi with the plan. It’s not Ruth with the execution of the plan. It’s not Boaz who responds nobly to her request. It’s God behind the scenes caring for those who sought refuge in Him. He’s the One who in this chapter and in chapter 4 will care for Naomi. He will care for Ruth. And He will even care for Boaz, in every case looking out for His own.

Now as we look at this section let me just remind you of the sort of chronological flow of the context. Most of the story of Ruth occurs over a period of a couple of months. In the late spring and early summer of the year. The first five verses of chapter 1, that’s a period of about 10 to 12 years. The 10 years that they were in Moab probably two years of famine or so of drought and famine leading up to their decision to leave. So, the first five verses 10 - 12 years. But from there

on the rest of Ruth takes place in a couple months' time. Beginning in chapter 1: 6 and running through the end of chapter 1 you have the journey home; about 60 to 75 miles depending on the route they took. Probably for two women taking that route which is a lot of elevation climbs and ascents probably a seven to ten-day journey.

Chapter 2, most of chapter 2 occurs on one day in the field during barley harvest. But notice 2:23 refers to the entire barley and wheat harvest being completed so a period of about 6 - 7 weeks transpires there.

And 3:2 refers to the time as "barley winnowing time." That typically came after both the barley and the wheat harvest had occurred, and the wheat and barley had been transported to the threshing floor. So, 3:1 - 18 is part of a single day time for the plan to take place time for Ruth to prepare herself and then one night at the threshing floor.

As I've noted already for you, I've entitled this act "Act 4" in this drama "A Bold Proposal." Now this act begins with an extraordinarily radical plan. But I've called it a biblical plan for deliverance, and I'll explain that later. For now, I just want you to track with me through the text. Notice that chapter 3 begins with the word "then". That connects its timing back to 2:23. The barley and wheat harvest mentioned there typically lasted for 6 to 8 weeks or a couple of months.

Apparently between chapter 2 and between chapter 3 a couple of months pass. During that time no doubt Ruth's daily routine was much like that recorded in chapter 2. She worked literally from daylight until after dark. Six days a week taking only the Sabbath off. For two months this was a grueling time in an agricultural society. But if you were going to be prepared for the rest of the year you had no other options. You had to harvest when the harvest was there so that you could be prepared for the rest of the year. This is how she worked.

No doubt Naomi during this time is thinking, conjecturing. No doubt she conjectured from Boaz's initial response to Ruth that he might eventually be open to marrying her. She already put it together after their initial meeting that he was one of their kinsmen redeemers. So, after both harvests were complete, and nothing had happened, Naomi was probably surprised. Probably

surprised that there had been no further interest shown apparently. Perhaps she purposefully waited until after the harvest was complete hoping and praying that during those weeks their paths would cross again and maybe things would deepen and relationships would grow, and he would propose. But when she saw that nothing had happened Naomi decides to take matters into her own hands.

One day she decided to lay out for Ruth a plan that had been brewing in her mind over those weeks. And that's where verse 1 of chapter 3 begins. "Then ..." after that time had passed, after the harvest was done "... Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter....'" That makes sense because it's only the nature of that relationship that is going to give Ruth any ear to hear this daring scheme that Naomi's about to propose. It's only in the context of that relationship it makes any sense at all. ... "My daughter ..." [Verse 1 goes on to say] "... shall I not seek security for you that it may be well with you?" That's a rhetorical question that expects a yes answer. The Hebrew word translated "security" there literally means a place of rest. "Shall I not seek [a place of rest for you] ...?" In Israel it referred to the security and the happiness that a woman longed for and that she hoped to find in a home with a loving husband. Ironically, Naomi is now about to put feet to her own prayers.

Go back to Ruth 1 and notice verse 8. "Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law 'Go return each of you to her mother's house. May Yahweh deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May Yahweh grant that you may find rest each in the house of a husband.'" This was her prayer. And now, in chapter 3, she's going to put some feet to that prayer. Naomi seeks security for Ruth. But notice she seeks it for her, and I love this, she says "That it may be well with you." That refers obviously to a general desire for well-being but in Ruth's circumstances it includes a husband. It includes provision for the necessities of life such as food and shelter and clothing, and obviously, it includes brighter prospects for the future. You can just see Naomi's heart here. Her sole concern is for Ruth and not for herself. Naomi asked Ruth, isn't it right that I would be concerned for you to have rest? That is to have a home and a husband. Isn't it right that I should be concerned for that? And that question demands a yes answer.

So, having set the stage, Naomi introduces her solution to Ruth's lack of security. Verse 2. "Now, is not Boaz our kinsmen with whose maids you were...?" Ruth now realizes she has been set up by that rhetorical question. Although here Naomi refers to Boaz as their acquaintance or their relative, in general terms, it's clear that she's referring back to the concept of the "go-el" you remember the "kinsmen redeemer" that we talked about. Go back to 2:20. Naomi already was aware of this. "Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'May he be blessed of the Lord who has not withdrawn his kindness ...'" that is may Boaz be blessed of the Lord and the Lord has not withdrawn His kindness from the living and the dead. "And again, Naomi said to her, 'The man is our relative ...'" literally he is near to us. He is one of our kinsmen redeemers.

So, Naomi was very much aware of this. We don't know for sure if Naomi had previously explained this concept of the go-el, the kinsmen redeemer, to Ruth or not, but it seems likely since it's assumed that Ruth understood this. So, in light of their relationship to Boaz, Naomi points out that that night that very night was the perfect night to seize opportunity. Notice verse 2, "Behold ..." It's one of those words in Hebrew that says, "pay attention, think about this, look at this." "Behold he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight." Now, we don't live in an agricultural society so it's a little hard for us to appreciate sort of what's going on and what this story's all about. Let me just give you a brief exposure to it.

The first thing that happened of course in the harvesting was, (or in the process I should say) of the grain after it had been planted and grown was the harvesting. Here's a picture of some women harvesting not barley but wheat near Bethlehem near where this scene would have unfolded. So, it was first harvested. And then there were several processes once it had been harvested that had to be completed. The first and most obvious one is that it had to be transported to the nearby threshing floor, and it was the most rudimentary of means that were used. The poor donkey there is buried beneath a load of grain. And it had to be transported nearby to the threshing floor. It's likely that the threshing floor was near the fields where the grain had been harvested. This was typical. The threshing floor was either a stone surface or a dirt surface that had been hardened and compacted. Here's an example of one that's made out of a stone ledge surrounded so that the grain can't escape. Here's a picture of another that's a little more basic. Just a pile of rocks and earth around it.

Normally, threshing floors were on hilltops or on other elevated places so that they could catch the afternoon and evening breezes off the Mediterranean. That was essential for the winnowing process. So, they were typically also on the east side of the village or town so that the Mediterranean winds which came in from the west would carry the chaff away from the living areas. So once the barley had been harvested had been transported to the threshing floor, it would be threshed. The way it was threshed was with an animal pulling a sledge, a wooden board or set of boards put together and on the bottom of those boards typically would be embedded with rocks. And the animal would drag that sledge across the surface, across the wheat that had been scattered all across the floor of the threshing floor, and in so doing the grain was separated from the chaff by the weight of the sledge and by the constant pressure and friction. This usually was done after the harvest at the beginning of the dry season after you had everything gathered in late May or early June.

Now the next step in the process (once you had separated the grain and the chaff by this threshing process) was winnowing. This was to separate the worthless chaff from the grain. In the late afternoon early evening when the sea breezes from the Mediterranean began to blow, they would toss the separate grain up into the air with a pitchfork, and the wind would easily carry the chaff away because it's almost weightless. It's like a fine dust and so the chaff would be blown away and the heavier grains, the kernels of grain would fall back to the floor of the threshing floor where they would be swept up at the end of the day into a pile. At some point of course the separated kernels would be bagged up and transported into the city. This is what's going on in this story.

Now, we're told that he would be there at night. He winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight. We can't be certain why Boaz was winnowing his barley at night. It's possible the text simply means in the evening. In the summer months typically the afternoon breezes began at about four or five in the afternoon and continued to a little after sunset; perfect time for winnowing. Or it's possible, and this happens there often in Israel, that the winds were just too gusty during the day, and he had to wait until after sunset to catch the lighter breezes. We don't know. But he's going to be there. And he's going to be there tonight. The men would take turns

sleeping at the threshing floor during the harvest and winnowing process until the process for all the grain had been completed for obvious reasons to protect the grain that had been harvested really more precious than gold in agricultural society from both thieves and from animals. It's unlikely that Boaz, a man of wealth and means, stayed at the threshing floor every night and that may be why Naomi says he'll be there tonight. But somehow, she knew that he planned to be at the threshing floor on that evening.

Now, so far, all that Naomi has told Ruth was that the solution involved Boaz and his responsibility as the kinsmen redeemer. And she explained that the circumstances were absolutely perfect for that night. But notice beginning in verse 3 she unveils the very specific parts of her plan. Here's what I want you to do Ruth verse 3, "Wash yourself, therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your *best* clothes ..." She says first of all I want you to take a bath; you know it wasn't quite as simple as it is in our day. You didn't just step into the shower. It was a process, and it wasn't done every day. I want you to take a bath. And then I want you to put on some perfumed olive oil; that's what it means to anoint yourself. It's the ancient equivalent of perfume. And it was really very important considering the hot climate there in Israel and the absence of all modern deodorants.

And I want you to put on your best clothes. Now we don't know exactly what Naomi meant here. It's unclear even from the text itself. You know, the word best, notice in our translation is in italics. That means that it's not in the original language, but it's supplied by the translators. All she really said is put on your clothes. Now the translators opt for "best clothes" not because this is what the word itself means but rather because of its similarity to another passage. Turn back to Ezekiel. Ezekiel 16 is one of those famous chapters in the Old Testament that talks about God taking Israel for a wife and then she was unfaithful to Him. But I want you to notice the description in Ezekiel 16 beginning in verse 8. "Then I passed by you and saw you and behold you were at the time for love. So, I spread my skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine," declares the Lord God.

Then (and here's the similarity and why they chose what they did), then I bathed you with water. I washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. I also clothed you with embroidered cloth and put sandals of porpoise skin on your feet, and I wrapped you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands and a necklace around your neck. I also put a ring in your nostril and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus, you were adorned with gold and silver and your dress was a fine linen silk and embroidered cloth.

You can see the similarity and because of that the translators have taken the Ruth passage to mean that she was to dress up in her best clothes to present herself well as she proposes to Boaz. That's possible. It's also possible that when she says put on your clothes the Hebrew word she uses is used most frequently of an outer garment, a heavy cloak. In the case of poor people this outer cloak was used for a blanket at night according to Exodus 22. And that makes sense here in the context. Think about that. Here's a poor widow who's planning to spend the night in the open field. She will need her outer cloak as a blanket to keep warm. Of course, it would also help disguise her to keep her from being recognized. So that's possible.

It's also possible when we read the word "clothes" here (and this is a very popular interpretation by commentators) that Naomi meant for Ruth to stop wearing the clothes that were associated with her mourning over the death of her husband. In other words, Naomi is saying, ok I want you to bathe yourself, I want you to anoint yourself with perfume and I want you to put your regular clothes back on. I want you to end the period of your mourning. This is possible.

Again it's very similar to another Old Testament portion and that is in 2 Samuel 12:20 where you remember after the death of David's son we read this, "David arose from the ground" this is after he hears about the death of his son before this he was mourning, he had torn his clothes, he was fasting when he hears that his son had died, and he realizes that's God's purpose. It says, "David arose from the ground, washed, anointed himself and changed his clothes and he came into the house of the Lord and worshiped." As a result of his doing this the people around David understood that he had stopped mourning for his son. It's possible that that's exactly what Naomi is encouraging Ruth to do. Ruth it's time to stop mourning over Mahlon. It's time for you to

move on. So, I want you to wash yourself, I want you to anoint yourself with perfume, and I want you to put your normal clothes back on.

Now Naomi's directions for Ruth continue in verse 3. "And go down to the threshing floor..." That's interesting. Go down to the threshing floor. You know ancient cities were usually built on the highest geographical points for defensive reasons so when you left the city, you always went down, and she says once you arrive at the threshing floor "Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking." Ruth was to stay out of sight until Boaz had finished the evening meal and had lain down for the night. After a hard day's work, a long hard day's work, a good meal, a little wine he would be relaxed, and he would quickly go to sleep.

Ruth is to stay hidden but notice verse 4. "It shall be when he lies down that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down." Now that seems really strange to us. What exactly is Naomi suggesting that Ruth do here? Sadly, there are some who have concluded wrongly that Naomi is actually suggesting that Ruth sexually seduce Boaz. I mean after all it is the time of the Judges, and it was not uncommon for prostitutes to show up at the threshing floor to solicit sinful sexual behavior from the workers. But there's absolutely no hint in this passage of anything like that. In fact, everything in this book cries out against that interpretation.

Chapter 2:1 says that Boaz was a man of noble character. After Ruth shows up on that night look at his response in 3:10. He asked Yahweh to bless Ruth for her action that night. We're also about to be told in 3:11 that Ruth is a woman of excellence and virtue. In addition to that even though nothing sinful happens, Boaz is still going to insist that Ruth leave before daylight so that she will in no way taint her own reputation or his. So that's not what's going on here. This is not a suggestion that she sexually seduce Boaz and in so doing encouraged him to marry her. So, what exactly is Naomi suggesting that Ruth do in this verse?

Well, the Hebrew word translated "feet" where it says uncover his feet, that word occurs in only one other place outside of this passage, and it's in Daniel 10:6. And there it refers to the lower limbs including the feet, the legs and the thighs. So, Naomi tells Ruth to uncover Boaz's lower

limbs and then to lie down nearby. Apparently, this was a custom that Boaz would recognize. We don't know how common it was or how often it was practiced, but the bottom line here, (and we're going to see it) is that Naomi was instructing Ruth in this way through this custom to actually propose to Boaz. Look down in verse 9 of chapter 3. "He said who are you? And she answered, 'I am Ruth, your maid ...'" And here's this expression that we just saw in Ezekiel "... spread your covering over your maid." "Marry me is how that translates in modern English. Marry me for you are my kinsmen redeemer. What Naomi is telling Ruth to do is through an ancient custom that was practiced at least in some places at some times to propose marriage to Boaz.

Oh, and by the way she expected that it would be clear to Boaz because notice verse 4 "Then he will tell you what you should do." That's all you need to do, and he'll take it from there. He'll get it. He'll know what you're about. Naomi said once you've done these things just wait for instruction. By the way, this statement shows not only Naomi's confidence in the integrity of Boaz, I love this, but it also reveals her newfound confidence in God's providence. God will work this out. Now here is a woman who has come from doubt who caused her with her husband to leave the land and move to idolatrous Moab, and now she's willing to entrust her future and the future of her daughter-in-law to God. She now believes that God can even direct the responses of a man when he wakes from sleep. My wife would tell you that's almost a miracle. Verse 5, she said to her, this is Ruth to Naomi. "All that you say I will do." Don't misunderstand here. Ruth's response isn't merely faith in Naomi. I mean after all, let's just be honest, this seems like a radical plan. Instead, Ruth has clearly come to have a deep confidence in Yahweh as well.

Now I want to stop there tonight because this passage has some important lessons for us. I want to point out some implications of this text. And I want you to bear with me, ok, because I want to start with some applications, listen carefully, that are not the main point of these verses. But they are important lessons that are legitimately gleaned from these verses. But stay tuned. We'll finish our time by looking at the primary application of this passage, the primary authorial intent of this passage, so stay with me. Don't doubt that I'm going to get there. But these are legitimate applications we can draw.

Number one, don't interpret narrative portions of Scripture as normative. In other words, we should never assume that simply because a biblical character does something that it is right, or if it is right that we should imitate it. This is very confusing to many Christians. They come to their Bibles, and they read a narrative portion of Scripture a story in Scripture, and the key person in the story does something, and they immediately think, well I should do that. The classic example ... please don't do this... is Gideon's fleece. Do not put out a fleece to determine the will of God. Remember in that story God gets angry with Gideon for his lack of faith. In addition, it's not normative. Because it happens doesn't mean you should do it.

Related to this one and the reason I wanted to lay that one out is (and again stay with me)don't try to build an approach to dating, courtship and marriage on a biblical model. I want to make this point here, I wanted to make it at some point in the flow of Ruth because there are several ideas that have surfaced in recent years among Christians claiming to be biblical models for finding a spouse. But honestly, they are all built on an exegetical foundation of sand.

Ok. You want a biblical model for finding a spouse? Let me give you some biblical approaches for finding a spouse.

Number one, here you go. You ready? Got your pen ready? Those of you who are thinking about this you parents. Number one, find an attractive prisoner of war, bring her home, shave her head, trim her nails, and give her new clothes, she's yours; Deuteronomy 21. It's a biblical model.

Number two, find a man with seven daughters and impress him by watering his flock. This is Moses in Exodus 2.

Number three, go to a party and hide. When the women come out to dance grab one and carry her off to be your wife. This is the Benjamites in Judges 21.

Number four, have God create a wife for you while you sleep. But note this will cost you a rib. Genesis 2.

Number five, agree to work seven years in exchange for a woman's hand in marriage. Get tricked into marrying the wrong woman, then work for another seven years for the woman you wanted to marry in the first place; that's right 14 years of hard labor for a wife. This is Jacob in Genesis 29. Here's one you will not want to try on your own. Don't try this at home.

Number six, cut off 200 foreskins of your future father-in-law's enemies, and get his daughter for a wife. This is David in 1 Samuel 18.

Number seven, become the emperor of a nation and hold a beauty contest. Ahasuerus in Esther chapter 2.

Number eight, when you see someone you like go home and tell your parents I have seen a woman; get her for me. If your parents question your decision simply say, "She's the one for me." This is Sampson in Judges 14.

Number nine, purchase a piece of property and along with the property get a wife as part of the deal. This is Boaz in Ruth 4. Listen if you want a biblical model choose one of those. Now obviously I say that tongue in cheek. I want you to see though that there are not distinctive biblical models for choosing a spouse. You cannot use narrative as normative. But the most common methods among Christians today are dating and courtship. I understand that. I've read a lot about both of these.

Let me make it clear to you that neither of those models is forbidden in Scripture. Let me also say to you that neither of those models is commanded in Scripture To put it another way both of them are biblically acceptable. And if, in the future, another model comes along as long as it doesn't contradict what the Scripture teaches it will be acceptable as well. In the end this is not a clear biblical issue. Don't make it one.

Every moral decision that we are faced with falls into one of three categories. It is either "thus saith the Lord thou shalt, chapter and verse", "thus saith the Lord thou shalt not, chapter and verse" and everything else falls into the third category which is issues of conscience. And we're told how to make those decisions in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 - 10. If you want to learn

more about issues of conscience and how to make those decisions, tune in online to the four messages I did on Romans 14 a number of years ago now on issues of conscience. I think I called it “Hard Call.”

So, understand that you shouldn't make this a biblical issue. Make up your own mind before the Lord. If you're in your parents' home, you're responsible to them, they pay your bills, then you need to go by their conscience. But don't judge others if they choose to do this differently. It's very important. You say, well what about you, Tom? What about you and Sheila? Well, it doesn't really matter. This is an issue of conscience. But I will tell you.

My advice is don't practice recreational dating but intentional dating. By recreational dating I mean the kind of dating in which marriage is not in view at all. This is the kind of dating that typically takes place in the early teen years but that some people seem never to grow out of. It's dating that's just about hanging out with somebody you like, having fun and unfortunately often making out and other physical involvement. That kind of dating is contrary to the Scripture because it places you and the other person in serious temptation. So, don't date recreationally.

Instead, date intentionally. Adult, that is non-recreational dating, when you're old enough to think about marriage is intentionally pursuing a person to get to know them better either as a better friend or as a potential spouse. But let me say for those of you because I know this is an issue in our church as it is across the country with Christian teenagers and Christian young people don't take dating so seriously either. A couple of dates do not equal a marriage proposal. Don't think of it that way yourself, don't think about it with others who date. It's ok to have several dates and then graciously stop dating when one or both concludes that they can be friends, but they don't have a desire to pursue a deeper relationship that may head toward marriage. I hate to admit this to you, but I did a lot of intentional dating in college. Like one or two girls every week, different ones. Because I wanted to know these people, and I wanted them to know me. And in God's providence, He brought through that process Sheila and me together. So, don't try to build an approach to dating, courtship, and marriage on a biblical model. It's an issue of conscience. Make a decision what you want to do before the Lord or as parents what you're going to have your children do. But then don't judge others by the standard you set.

But as I told you before the major application of this scene of this act in Ruth is not about dating and courtship. Rather it's about how two women to boldly decided to take God at His Word. And like them (and here's the real implication of this passage we've just looked at is) we must abandon our own ideas and follow God's ways. Now admittedly, Naomi's plan the way she has suggested that it unfold are radical, and they have the potential for creating a disaster. But where would Naomi come up with such a plan?

Now I understand her specific strategy of wash yourself and put on your clothes and go down and uncover his feet all that was based on her own wisdom, her knowledge of the circumstances at the time, the cultural customs. But the basic idea behind Naomi's plan was an effort to follow the plan that Scripture taught. You see there was a custom sanctioned by God in the Mosaic law. A custom called "levirate marriage." Turn back to Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 25 and notice verse 5.

When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son the wife of the wife of the deceased shall not be *married* outside *the family* to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go into her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. It shall be that the first born whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

And then there's a stipulation for how to handle it if he refuses to do this; he's publicly shamed. But what I want you to see is that this was the method God put in place to care for a widow without a child. And this is exactly what Naomi is recommending to Ruth. The fact that Naomi stakes her future and Ruth's future on an obscure plan laid out in the Scripture for circumstances just like theirs is such a powerful lesson for us all. I want you to think for a moment about what we've learned so far about how Naomi had tried to solve her problems in the past. She and Elimelech tried to provide for their family through the unbiblical plan of moving to Moab. And then after her husband and sons die, she decides to return to Israel, and what was her plan for caring for Ruth? Go back and marry an idolator. Bad plan. But this time Naomi, (repentant

Naomi, Naomi living in the land, Naomi desiring to honor God) determines to seek security for Ruth and for herself God's way.

Folks, the main lesson of this plan laid out in the first five verses of chapter 3, its implication for us is crystal clear. We must give up our own schemes and our own manipulations to solve our problems, and we must determine instead to do things God's way as written in His Word and entrust our future to Him. That's what Naomi is doing in those five verses. She understood the kinsmen redeemer. She understood the "go-el." She understood that this was God's way to provide for them and what she is suggesting here is exactly that. I'm tired, she says, of making my own plans and my own schemes and solving my own problems. I'm going to rely on what God has said in His Word.

Let me encourage you. There has to come a point in every life when we come to that place when we say I am sick of trying to work myself out of my problems. It's time that I listen to my Creator and that I did things His way and entrust my future to Him. Let me ask you tonight. Have you ever truly come to that place, or do you listen to all of the advice around you, all of the people who want to tell you what you ought to do, the world that has something to say, what's going on right now, what's popular. Or do you tune your ear to God's way as revealed in His Word. That's what Naomi models for us. She's done with her schemes. She's going to pursue the way God has laid out in His Word. May God help us to do the same.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we do thank You for how You worked in Naomi's life to bring her to that place. Lord, it was a hard road that You took her down. She had so many troubles through which she learned that lesson. The way of the transgressor is hard. You disciplined her severely. But, Father, I thank You that in Your grace she learned the lesson.

Help us to learn it as well. Father, we think of ourselves as so clever. We have our schemes and our plans for getting ourselves out of trouble. And it seems like coming to You and to Your Word is the last resort. Forgive us, oh God. Help us instead to abandon our own ways, to

abandon the path set before us by the world around us and help us to come back to Your Word forever settled in heaven.

We pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.