The Book of Ruth

Uncovering Feet

Ruth 3:1-13

God is always consistent, but never predictable. Shouldn't His people imitate Him? Ruth has come with Naomi to Israel and been blessed gleaning in Boaz's field. God has provided wonderfully in the short term, but as of yet there is no solution. Chapter three presents bold and crafty plan that makes many uncomfortable which is one way God uses this story.

Summary of the Text

Naomi has gone from being bitter against God, to blessing Him and others, and now becomes fully engaged in seeking the well-being of Ruth. She asks Ruth if she should seek her rest (v. 1). She also asks rhetorically if Boaz is their relative and makes the point that he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor (v. 2). Wash, dress, and anoint yourself, put on your best dress, she tells Ruth, but don't reveal yourself to him until he's done feasting (v. 3). Note where he lies down, and when he does, uncover his feet and lie there, and he will tell you what to do (v. 4). Ruth agrees and carries out the plan, uncovering and laying down at his feet after he feasted and conked out (vv. 5-7). Boaz wakes up in the middle of the night, startles to see a woman at his feet (v. 8). He asks who she is and Ruth answer that she is his maidservant and tells him to spread his wings over her because he is her *goel*, her kinsman-redeemer (v. 9). He calls her blessed by Yahweh for showing more kindness at the end than the beginning, not going after a younger man (v. 10). He says not to fear because he will do what she requests and all the people know of her virtue (v. 11). But there's a nearer kinsman-redeemer so she should stay the night and he will find out in the morning if he'll fulfill that duty. If he won't, as sure as God lives, he will perform it; she should lie down until morning (vv. 12-13).

Instruments in the Hands of the Redeemer

Good stories take you deeper in every chapter, building on what has come before, and Ruth does this masterfully. Naomi prayed that God would deal kindly with Orpah and Ruth as they have dealt kindly with the dead and with her, and provide them rest in the house of a husband (1:8-9). Naomi was broken and bitter, and yet she didn't turn completely away from God. She entreated Ruth to leave her until Ruth wasn't having any (1:16-18). Ruth went to work in Israel; Naomi permitted it (2:2). When Ruth came home hugely blessed, Naomi realized the Lord was at work and had not forsaken her dead husband and sons, nor her (2:20). Now living with Ruth for some time, she hatches this idea that God will use to answer her old, compromised prayers in an uncompromised way. Naomi's despair has been transformed into hope, and she is now an instrument in the redeemer's hand to help Ruth find a kinsman-redeemer. True hardship happened to Naomi (and to Ruth), and the end of it, the thing that was standing between her and her joy in the Lord was her own unbelief. It was not "generational curses", poverty, widowhood, or anything else. Her prayer for Ruth is coming true and the Lord will use her faith, hope, and love to bring it to pass. Her plan is brilliant, as faith-filled as her despair was faithless. Our prayer for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven starts in our own life, and He often answers through our own obedience which should lead us to pray, "Change *me* first."

A Decent Proposal

Many things in this story lead interpreters to cast blame on Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. It happens at night after threshing, a time when the threshers would celebrate. Pagans would get drunk and use prostitutes there, so it wouldn't be a good look for Ruth to be seen there. Naomi's plan is risky both for how it looks and for how Boaz will respond. "Uncovering feet" can mean sexual relations as in "uncovering someone's nakedness" (Lev. 18:6-19), and regardless it is a sexual action. Ruth's whole course of action is preparation for a wedding. In Ezekiel 16 the Lord describes how He washed, anointed, clothed Israel in the course of taking her for a bride,

and spread His wing over her in covenant love (vv. 8-14). This is exactly what Ruth does. She washes, anoints herself with oil which perfume, puts on her best dress, uncovers Boaz's feet and asks Boaz to marry her. Unlike with Yahweh and Israel, Ruth the female widow takes action. The verb "lie down" is the same one used in sexual contexts. It would be hard to come up with a more aggressive proposal, leaving the reader in a position to love or hate it and to feel pretty uncomfortable in indecision. Is Ruth indecent or wise? Is she brazen or faithfully bold? Is she like the Moabite women famous for luring Israelite men into the sexual immorality part and parcel of Chemosh worship and the entrapment at Baal Peor (Num. 25), or is she like Rebekah leading Isaac to repentance and Jael craftily inviting Sisera into her tent? Feminine virtue rarely overcomes evil with physical strength but rather with wisdom and craft, which is what we see here. Remember this is an apology, a defense and explanation, for the legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty. You wouldn't establish the legitimacy of David by describing his great grandfather as fornicating with a Moabite. Obviously this isn't the courtship model we might envision, but biblical people think in terms of principles and not rigid methods. Naomi is trusting in God when she comes up with this plan and there is no indication of backsliding or of a "fall" in this scene, and it would be quite a plunge if so. Naomi isn't selling Ruth for her own gain, but instead seeking her rest and security (v. 1), something understood immediately by Boaz (v. 10). He doesn't say "Everyone knows you are virtuous and if only they knew better!" He knows her reputation is well-deserved (v. 11), and rather than take advantage of her and possess her quietly, he goes out to do his duty by contacting the nearer kinsman-redeemer (v. 12). This whole thing is aggressive, risky, dangerous, fraught with peril, and absolutely faithful. God has always redeemed people who were accused of sexual sins, many of them actually guilty. This proposal is more than decent. It is holy and teaches us to be likewise.

Finding Rest

Remember this is an eighth-day book. Israel should have found rest in Judges, the seventh book of the Bible, in the Sabbath promise land, but there was no king and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Ruth is the story of the coming king David. Israel will find rest—faith, order, and justice—in the man after God's own heart, a picture of the greater David to come. "Who knows," Naomi wonders, "maybe Ruth will find rest in this man of Bethlehem, Boaz?" (vv. 1-2). Naomi knows about the practice of kinsman-redeemers and about levirate marriages. It's interesting that neither of these strictly apply in this circumstance. Ther's no living brother who is obligated to marry Ruth. The kinsman-redeemer should do what he can, but there's no one really close and obviously obligated. Boaz knows of someone closer and will check, but he willingly takes on the obligation. He praises Ruth for not choosing a younger man. She was kind to Naomi in the first place, but now goes even further to try to marry within her family, showing "more kindness at the end than at the beginning" (v. 10). This is a triangle of love and sacrifice. Naomi wants to bless Ruth. Ruth wants to bless Naomi. Boaz wants to bless Ruth and Naomi. Everyone seeks another's good in a sacrificial way, and all in honor to God. Ruth risks the most and finds rest under the wings of Boaz, her kinsman redeemer, whose feet she uncovered. In our time when everyone does what is right in his own eyes, we need faith to think like Naomi, to risk like Ruth, and to love like Boaz.