

# RUTH

Commentary by Leonard Davis

– a Study in Responsibility



A study of the characters in the Biblical account of Ruth provides good insight into the idea of what it means to exercise responsibility in all our relationships. By examining how the various characters in the account behaved, we can learn valuable lessons as to how we should conduct ourselves as God provides opportunities for ministry to others in the normal routine of life.

# RUTH

## A Study in Responsibility

### INTRODUCTION

A study of the characters in the Biblical account of Ruth provides good insight into the idea of what it means to exercise responsibility in all our relationships. By examining how the various characters in the account behaved, we can learn valuable lessons as to how we should conduct ourselves as God provides opportunities for ministry to others in the normal routine of life.

In addition to this main theme, we also see reinforced the idea that God knows no foreigners. We sometimes think that God's love extends only to those who are directly involved in His purposes. Not so! Consider this illustration: A man had two sons. He needed a can of paint from the hardware store and asked one son to go get the paint. He even let this son use his car to go to the store. Does this mean he loves the other son any less? Absolutely not! Who does the father hold responsible for the successful completion of the assigned job? The answer is obvious. It has to be the son he sent to the store and enabled him to go using the family car.

God's chosen people for stewardship of His plan of salvation during the time following the patriarchs until the middle of the seventieth week of Daniel (around AD 34) was the nation of Israel. Up until that time, God had worked through individuals. After the Nation of Israel failed in their stewardship of God's salvation plan, responsibility was passed to the church which included not only Jews but also Gentiles. The new covenant was instituted with all who had the faith of Abraham. (See Matt 26:28, Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; and 1 Cor 11:25)

The people of Israel thought they had a corner on God's love since he had chosen them to help fulfill His purpose. They, in their arrogance, considered all others to be inferior foreigners. However, God knows no foreigners since He is the Creator of all men. In several instances which were captured in the literature of the nation of Israel, God was seen as being inclusive of those outside of Israel in the development of that nation and some of its key role models. We see such an inclusion in the historical accounts of the Old Testament switch from the time of the Judges.

Such an account is captured in the story of Ruth.

During the time of the Judges, we are told that all men did what was right in their own sight. In contrast to this, a character was introduced who does not show such disregard for responsibility and for what is right. This noble character is a woman named Ruth.

### Responding to Hardships – 1:1-2

<sup>1</sup>Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. <sup>2</sup>The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. Ruth 1:1-2 (NASB95)

We have really been blessed in our lifetime to not have personally experienced a condition of famine. It is easy to see how such a condition could develop. All we need to do is to recall the drought conditions that we experienced during the last several years and then extend that to about ten consecutive years and you can see how severe food shortages could develop especially if people had no means to rapidly transport food from area to another. Famine striking an area would be like a major factory closing in a small town today. The means of support would disappear and in our own country many people have found themselves in such a situation from time to time. When the factory closes, people are faced with the decision of what to do. Many decide to stay in their hometown and try to ride out the difficult time, hoping that something will change. Others look elsewhere and move away to areas that have jobs.

Famine was only one of many problems the nation of Israel encountered. Because of such economic hardship, people would leave their homeland and look for means to support their families. It still happens even today. Whether Elimelech intended to stay in Moab or return to Israel is not known. Elimelech had a sense of responsibility for his family and took action to protect them from the conditions and situation in which they found themselves. He was like those who decide to move away and find opportunity in other places. In primitive times such as then and in such a small country as Israel, he found it difficult to go very far and, in spite of

not going far, he still had to leave his own country and live in a foreign land. He took his wife and two sons to the country of Moab which was not very far away – maybe a hundred miles at the most. Apparently, this was adequate to find food and work. This was a courageous choice. The prospects of living in a foreign country carried with it some uncertainty. However, as we shall see, the problems that this family was to face were not over.

### Sometimes It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better – 1:3-5

<sup>3</sup> Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> They took for themselves Moabite women *as* wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. <sup>5</sup> Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband. Ruth 1:3-5 (NASB95)

Elimelech's wife Naomi had a really serious problem. The death of her husband was serious enough since women had few rights. Naomi was a foreigner and this just further complicated the problems. We hear so much today about women's rights. There is no reason women should not have the same standing under the law and in the work place as men and in most situations (in Western Civilization) this is true. However, this has not always been the case. It wasn't too many years ago that women did not have the right to vote in this "land of the free and home of the brave." In the time of the judges in the Middle East (and in most of the Middle East today) women's rights were almost nonexistent.

Naomi was fortunate to have had two sons on whom she could depend because they would provide for her. Apparently, this family was making the best of a bad situation as they tried to lead normal lives as displaced citizen in the land of Moab. The sons married women of Moab which was not an ideal situation because in doing so they were not maintaining purity in race and religion which was very important to the Israelites. Nevertheless, they were going about life as if they were not going to return to Israel. They lived there about ten years and then both the young men died. Normally, the young widows would become the wives of the brothers of their deceased husbands, but Naomi had no more sons. There were no children born to either of the sons and their wives so the family unit became Naomi and the two daughters-in-law. Things were not too bad when Naomi had sons to provide for her,

but the situation had become quite serious when she not only had no resources but also had the extra responsibility of two daughters-in-law.

Without a man in the family, Naomi began to check out other options for herself and the two younger women. Generally, in that society, men conducted the business and women were at a definite disadvantage. One of Naomi's options was to go back to Israel where she might find relatives that could act in her behalf.

### Making Responsible Decisions – 1:6-13

<sup>6</sup>Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food. <sup>7</sup>So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup>And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup>“May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. <sup>10</sup>And they said to her, “No, but we will surely return with you to your people.” <sup>11</sup>But Naomi said, “Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? <sup>12</sup>“Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, <sup>13</sup>would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.” Ruth 1:6-13 (NASB95)

In the meantime, conditions improved in Israel. Naomi decided to return to her homeland. The three of them left and started toward the land of Judah. Naomi felt some responsibility for her two daughters-in-law. In that culture, the main family ties were with the husband's side of the family. Young women that married were closer to her in-laws than to her own mother and father. This explains why when Naomi left for Israel the two younger women prepared to go with her. Before they had gone very far, Naomi realized that she was not being fair to these young women in that the chance of them finding a husband in Israel was going to be very small. The younger women might have a better chance if they returned to their parents' home and she insisted that they go. She wanted them to go back, find husbands, have children and be happy. They were likely still quite young, probably less than thirty. Both Orpah and Ruth had grown to love

Naomi and they did not want to leave. Finally, she convinced Orpah to return but Ruth would not be convinced.

### Making Difficult Decisions – 1:14-18

<sup>14</sup>And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. <sup>15</sup>Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” <sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you *or* turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people *shall be* my people, and your God, my God. <sup>17</sup>“Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if *anything but* death parts you and me.” <sup>18</sup>When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. Ruth 1:14-18 (NASB95)

One daughter-in-law followed Naomi's advice and tearfully left. However, Ruth chose to stay with Naomi. It was in this choice that she spoke some of the most beautiful words of devotion ever recorded.

It is quite possible to be associated with a person over a period of years and experience feelings of love and care for that person that are deeper than you felt toward your parents. Ruth felt that way toward Naomi. Here we see a relationship transcending nationalism. Ruth was not concerned that she would have to move from her native land to the land of Israel. She said, “Wither thou goest, I will go.” We see a relationship that transcends all previous friendships and relations. She said, “Your people will be my people.” This was even a relationship that transcended religious affiliation. Ruth said, “Your God will be my God.” The witness of Naomi's life must have been terrifically positive. We could assume that Ruth saw qualities in Naomi that would cause her to abandon her country, her former friends and relatives, and even the idols she was taught to worship.

Crisis situations usually lead to having to make difficult choices. Elimelech had to make such choices to leave Israel to find food for his family. Naomi made a courageous choice in going back to her homeland. This was followed by an equally difficult choice of Ruth to not go back to her parents' family but to become part of the family of her mother-in-law. All of us should hope that our lives could have such influence on others that they would choose to accept Jesus, to be a part of the kingdom of God and to associate themselves with God's people.

## Determining Our Disposition – 1:19-22

<sup>19</sup> So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” <sup>20</sup> She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. <sup>21</sup> “I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?” <sup>22</sup> So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. Ruth 1:19-22 (NASB95)

Life can be hard and the difficulties that many have to endure can take its toll on those who suffer through the problems they encounter. I have always been impressed with the effects of “hard times” as seen in the faces of people in old photographs taken in the early 1900's. Hardly ever do you see a smile on anyone's face and the effect of all their problems is etched on their faces.

The name Naomi means “sweetness” and the problems she had endured while living in Moab had taken its toll on her disposition and that was reflected in her face to the point that those who had previously known her barely recognized her when she returned to Bethlehem. Her sweetness had turned to bitterness and it showed in her countenance. We've read that the words we speak come from the heart. We could also add to that truth that our faces reflect the dispositions of our hearts. The bitterness that had built up in her heart not only showed in her face, it was evident in the words she spoke.

When we live with the realization that God is in control of everything, we are likely to cross that fine line in which we are apt to blame all the hardships we encounter on God and think that our condition is all His fault. If we factor into this picture the words of Paul in Romans 8:28, we can put the situations we encounter in a proper perspective and not see the problems we have as stumbling block but as stepping stones or building blocks by which we can become better rather than bitter. Though God is in control of everything, we have a free will by which we can choose how we will respond to the things that come our way. We can choose the way of bitter-ness or better-ness.

## Demonstration of Commitment – 2:1-3

<sup>1</sup>Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. <sup>2</sup>And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, “Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor.” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.” <sup>3</sup>So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Ruth 2:1-3 (NASB95)

Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem in the land of Judah and went about trying to survive in a society that had made some provision for widows and the disadvantaged. There is no mention of what the situation was for widows in the land of Moab. If there were any provisions, they were likely related to taking care of relatives and Naomi had no relatives in that area. Even Israel’s provision for assisting a disadvantaged person was typically taken on by relatives. There was some semblance of a community effort in place during this time in Israel. The provision of “gleaning” was to allow those who did not have the means of growing their own food to find enough to get by.

Most of what we recognize as charitable efforts for the needy have developed over the past two hundred years when Christians started to take seriously the teaching of the scriptures about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and healing the sick as part of the evangelism efforts that grew out of the renewed emphasis to make the Great Commission a reality. It is generally recognized that non-Christian religions have fewer charitable efforts than what we take for granted as what we should be doing.

It was humiliating for people to be unable to support themselves and to have to depend on charity. God’s law that required farmers to leave the corners of the field for the gleaners provided a means of self-help that would allow a person in need to do some work to get food to support themselves and their family. We also find that there was a blessing associated with obedience for the farmer. In Deuteronomy 24:19 we see a promise that God “would bless them in all the work of their hands for showing kindness to those in need.”

Ruth took advantage of this situation when she went to follow the harvesters in the fields so she and her mother-in-law could survive. In God’s provision she picked a field belonging to a relative of Naomi, a man named Boaz.



## Character Counts – 2:4-10

<sup>4</sup>Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, “May the LORD be with you.” And they said to him, “May the LORD bless you.”<sup>5</sup> Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, “Whose young woman is this?”<sup>6</sup> The servant in charge of the reapers replied, “She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab.”<sup>7</sup> “And she said, ‘Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.’ Thus she came and has remained from the morning until now; she has been sitting in the house for a little while.”<sup>8</sup> Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids.”<sup>9</sup> “Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw.”<sup>10</sup> Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” Ruth 2:4-10 (NASB95)

God looks upon the heart and His choices of those to whom He will give opportunities to take responsible behavior in carrying out His plans are influenced by the quality of character that He sees. If we observe behavior of people, we too can get some insight into the quality of character of a person. Notice that Boaz had been blessed with land and he used that to produce food and to provide employment for workers who needed to support themselves and their families. Boaz showed responsible behavior in that he was on the scene to observe how the harvest was going rather than being idle and unproductive.

We also see that Boaz showed appropriate care for his most important resource, his workers. He showed them respect by greeting them and wishing them well. We can tell that his workers respected him because they responded with a blessing upon Boaz. If you wish to know what kind of employer a person is, then just ask the people who are doing the work.

We also see that Boaz was organized in that he had appointed someone to be in charge of the worker to direct them and provide for their needs when he was not available. The fact that he had someone to represent him did not deter him from getting involved on a personal level by showing up and following up on any changes. In order to be effective in this, he had to be observant and he noticed a person that was new among those working in the field. Those who are committed to excellence do

not just observe but they also take action to determine the details of the observed changes.

We see that Boaz had the good sense to use the organization that he had in place and not undermine the authority of those who had been assigned responsibility. Instead of Boaz going directly to the stranger in the field, he asked the person in charge of the workers what was happening. This not only reinforced the foreman's sense of having responsibility and being trusted by Boaz, it also provided Boaz a chance to know if the foreman was knowledgeable about what was happening in his sphere of responsibility.

Boaz was a good steward of what God had placed under his care and he was also gracious in carrying out what he did. After Boaz learned the facts of Ruth's situation, he showed graciousness by taking initiative to acknowledge the difficult situation that Ruth was in and to provide encouragement to Ruth by letting her know that she was welcomed and would be safe. Ruth responded to his kindness and generosity by expressing genuine gratitude to him.

Why did Boaz take these extra steps to make special accommodations for Ruth? The answer lies in the basic good character of this man and it is very likely that he was influenced to be sensitive to the special situation of a non-Israelite woman in that society since his mother was Rahab from Jericho. He also realized that good behavior (Ruth's devotion to Naomi) needed to be acknowledged and rewarded. This is how such good actions are reinforced and a culture of everyone doing "the right thing" toward others is cultivated.

### Rewards of Commitment – 2:11-12

<sup>11</sup> Boaz replied to her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. <sup>12</sup> "May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge." Ruth 2:11-12 (NASB95)

Sometimes we wonder if "doing the right thing" toward another person is recognized by others. Admittedly, having others recognize what we do should not be the motivation for showing love to others; however, the thought might cross our minds. My guess is that both Naomi and Ruth were focused so much on

survival that other people's opinions were not high on their list of concerns.

In verse twelve we find what I will term the "Blessing of Boaz." When we do something that is unselfish, we can depend on God to recognize our motives and to reward what we do. In this blessing we find two benefits: recompense or repayment for deeds done and full wages that would be paid from God. The implied conditional part of the blessing is that these benefits are for those who find their refuge or place of safety under the overshadowing protection of Jehovah.

The word translated as "recompense" (in the KJV) is very similar to "shalom" or the Hebrew word for peace which also carries the idea of general well being and is spoken as a greeting as well as an implied blessing. The Hawaiian word "aloha" is used in a similar way. I guess that most of us think that if we are putting our trust in God and if we are doing what we should be doing in helping those in need, then we have an expectation that God will cause us to experience well being. We know that is not always the case and people do experience problems.

The second part of the blessing regarding "full wages" has an implication of something more specific or concrete as compared to the more general or abstract idea of "general well being." The Hebrew word translated as "full" is also closely associated with the word shalom which would carry the idea of being complete, safe, appropriate, and peaceable. The word "wages" implies an object of value that a person can use such as money or material possessions. Putting all this together, we get the idea that the Blessing of Boaz is that those who trust in the Lord and do what is right should experience a condition of well being and also have some material blessing that are beneficial to them. This could be contrasted with those who received material possessions for which they did not work and these possession cause problems in their lives. We have heard stories of people who "won the lottery" and the wealth produced more harm than good for them and their families.

### Gratitude for Graciousness – 2:13

<sup>13</sup> Then she said, “I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants.” Ruth 2:13 (NASB95)

An appropriate response for a kindness shown is always a respectful expression (addressed Boaz as “my lord” or sir) of appreciation. Ruth was well aware of her vulnerability in the society in which she lived and had the good common sense to maintain a proper decorum and pleasantness in her conduct. She recognized the grace and kindness that Boaz was showing her and she recognized that she was at a disadvantage in that culture since she was a foreigner. There was no indication that she had any thought that the opportunity to glean during harvest time or to be given special consideration and safety were entitlements or even something she deserved for being committed to Naomi. When we have a humble attitude about ourselves then we are more likely to be delighted and less likely to be disappointed when we are helped by others.

### Gratitude Engenders More Graciousness – 2:14-16

<sup>14</sup> At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar.” So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left. <sup>15</sup> When she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. <sup>16</sup> “Also you shall purposely pull out for her *some grain* from the bundles and leave *it* that she may glean, and do not rebuke her.” Ruth 2:14-16 (NASB95)

Have you ever done something nice or generous for another person and he or she said nothing to acknowledge what was done? If we sense that a kindness shown to others is not appreciated, then we have a tendency to look for other people who might be more thankful for what was done for them. Even if we do something anonymously, it is good to hear that the recipient was glad to have received what was given. Ruth’s humble response to the kindness shown by Boaz encouraged him to do even more.

Since Boaz knew that Ruth was an “outsider,” he took steps to include her in the meal that his workers were having. The account tells us that he took the initiative to make sure that she had an adequate amount to eat by personally serving her some of the roasted grain. My guess is that he did this since Ruth would have

probably considered it to be presumptive to just go and “help herself” to the food that was there. As mentioned earlier, his sensitivity to Ruth’s situation was likely heightened by the fact that his mother (Rahab) was not an Israelite.

The author of this account included a very subtle mention of what would seem to be an insignificant observation that Ruth did not eat all the roasted grain that was given to her. The reason she did that will be discovered later in the narrative and it speaks to the character of this young woman.

As the story unfolds, we see that Boaz’s generosity and care went a step further. He told his workers to make it easy for Ruth to collect an abundant amount of grain for her efforts. It is not going too far to suggest that the way Boaz showed graciousness to Ruth is the way that God shows graciousness to us as we respond to what He has done for us with gratitude and humility.

### Response to Graciousness – 2:17-18

<sup>17</sup> So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. <sup>18</sup> She took *it* up and went into the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also took *it* out and gave Naomi what she had left after she was satisfied. Ruth 2:17-18 (NASB95)

In our country we have safety nets that help people who encounter economic problems such as loss of employment. The most obvious safety net is unemployment benefits. What does it say about a person’s character if they lose their job, they diligently try to find other employment as opposed to a person who sees the unemployment benefits as an excuse to do nothing? Ruth could have concluded that she had found favor with Boaz and that she did not have to do anything else because he was looking out for her and Naomi.

It would appear that Ruth’s response was to use the favor that Boaz was showing toward her as a reason to be more diligent and to accomplish all she could. We would call this faithfulness. We see that she was satisfied with a modest amount of grain, but she worked until it was too dark to work any longer in the fields and then continued to finish up the day by threshing what she had gathered. Her labor was rewarded in that she had gathered an ephah (about six gallons) of barley grain. This amount was

thought to be equivalent to about fifteen days' wages for a laborer. So we see that Ruth's diligence and faithfulness paid off handsomely with abundant reward for her labor.

We find further insight into Ruth's character in that she was not focused only on her own needs but thought about Naomi while she was having the midday meal. The roasted grain that she did not eat was saved so that she could share it with Naomi. This is evidence of her generosity.

### Inquiry and Involvement – 2:19-23

<sup>19</sup> Her mother-in-law then said to her, "Where did you glean today and where did you work? May he who took notice of you be blessed." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." <sup>20</sup> Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed of the LORD who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead." Again Naomi said to her, "The man is our relative, he is one of our closest relatives." <sup>21</sup> Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "Furthermore, he said to me, 'You should stay close to my servants until they have finished all my harvest.' " <sup>22</sup> Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his maids, so that *others* do not fall upon you in another field." <sup>23</sup> So she stayed close by the maids of Boaz in order to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. And she lived with her mother-in-law. Ruth 2:19-23 (NASB95)

A healthy relationship thrives on information and interaction. Parents will ask their school-aged children "What did you learn today?" Such a question is simply an attempt to open us lines of communication and a way to show that they care what is happening in the life of the child. Unfortunately, such general questions do not yield a lot of details from most children. Naomi was specific in her questions to Ruth and these questions opened up an opportunity for Ruth to share what had happened that day.

Naomi was delighted when she learned of the meeting and recognized that since Boaz was a relative he might see some additional responsibility toward Ruth in providing protection as she worked among his field hands. To Naomi's credit, she glorified God for His kindness in directing Ruth go to the field of someone who was a relative and who would be gracious toward her. Naomi saw that God was in control of the situations of our lives and that is far different from the way most people think today. Today, we might comment that Ruth was "lucky" or "fortunate" that she just happened to go to the field of Boaz. Such

comments show that we have a condition in our culture that was described in Psalms 10:4 that in a secular society “God is not in all their thoughts.”

### Recognizing Responsibility as Advocate and Advisor – 3:1-5

<sup>1</sup> 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? <sup>2</sup> “Now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight. <sup>3</sup> “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. <sup>4</sup> “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.” <sup>5</sup> She said to her, “All that you say I will do.” Ruth 3:1-5 (NASB95)

In a society in which marriages were arranged, a young foreign woman needed an advocate and advisor to facilitate all that needed to happen to arrange a marriage. Normally, the parent would take care of such matters when their children were quite young. Since Boaz was middle aged and Ruth was likely in her mid-twenties, there was likely not a clear precedent to follow. Naomi realized that she had a role of surrogate parent in Ruth’s life and she rose to take on the role of directing events that could lead to a marriage arrangement. The recognition of this responsibility is found in the question “Shall I not seek security for you?” The implication was that if Naomi did not rise to the occasion, then finding such security would not happen. Many times we find ourselves in situations that we are the only one who can help and it is important that we are faithful in these cases.

Naomi coached Ruth in the way she should approach Boaz to indicate her interest in him. Naomi initiated the sequence of events that resulted in a positive outcome. We’ve all heard the jokes and jabs about mothers-in-law by the comedians, but here we see that Naomi was aware of a need in the life of Ruth and, instead of standing by to let things just happen, she took action to create an opportunity for Ruth. We see this expression of responsibility to help Ruth find some semblance of security for herself in the first part of Chapter three. Ruth was advised to put herself in the presence of Boaz who might fulfill the role of redeemer for Ruth.

Warren Wiersbe (*Be Committed*) pointed out that when the two widows came to Bethlehem, their plan was that Ruth would

take care of Naomi and both of them eke out an existence the best they could. But now Naomi had a new plan. If Ruth were to marry Boaz, then all of them can live happily ever after. Naomi could tell from Ruth's report of her earlier interaction with Boaz that he would be in favor of the plan, so she began to set things in motion. In that day, the parents arranged marriages; so Naomi was not out of place in what she did.

Naomi was also considering her responsibility to provide for her own needs and, at the same time, do the right thing with regard to her deceased husband's and sons' heritage. In fulfilling those responsibilities, she was careful to direct Ruth in the direction of developing a relationship with someone who could be a "redeemer" and not to just find a husband for her. Because of the laws regarding ownership of land, this person would need to be a kinsman who would be eligible to buy (or redeem) the real property of Elimelech. If this union produced a son, then that son would be the inheritor of Elimelech's portion and would also have responsibility to provide and care for Naomi.

Ruth also had responsibilities in that she needed to embrace in this process. She could have thought only about her own self interests, but she had a sense of loyalty (which carries the idea of responsibility) to Naomi. Since Ruth had more or less submitted herself to Naomi as her surrogate parent, she demonstrated responsibility to that relationship by following her advice regarding how to approach Boaz.

### A Step of Faith – 3:6-9

<sup>6</sup>So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative." Ruth 3:6-9 (NASB95)

This was a very awkward situation in which Ruth took initiative to declare herself available for marriage and, in doing so, to declare that she would welcome a proposal from Boaz. This was counter to the conventional practice of the man (or his parents) taking the initiative that would lead to marriage. Even today,



people are surprised when a woman proposes marriage to a man. This was a case where embracing responsibility on the part of Ruth was accompanied by substantial risk. The first and most obvious risk was that she would be rejected and that would carry with it emotional pain. The second risk was that such action would result in damage to her reputation as a woman of excellence. The risks were not realized because Boaz was a person of noble character.

I would assume that Boaz was reluctant to initiate action that would have led to marriage because there were also inherent risks for him by taking such action. He could have been rejected by Ruth which would not have been a great blow to his pride since he realized that he was much older than she. A more important reason for him to hold back was the fact that he knew that he did not have the right of first refusal in fulfilling the responsibility of a kinsman redeemer.

Perhaps the “life lesson” for us today is to realize that there are many opportunities for us to embrace responsibilities that we have as individuals or as a church and the catalyst that is needed is for someone to take initiative to put a process in motion even though there may be risks involved in doing that. In the case of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, it just took one step by Naomi to get the process started and to engage Ruth and Boaz to overcome their inertia to do what needed to be done. It is important to realize that every process begins with a single step. If we see something that is the “right thing to do” and take that step, then good things can result and continue for a long time. The domino effect applies to taking the right action as well as taking wrong actions.

### Accepting Responsibility – 3:10-13

<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> “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. <sup>12</sup> “Now it is true I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I. <sup>13</sup> “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.” Ruth 3:10-13 (NASB95)

Boaz exercised self discipline in dealing with Ruth. He showed her appropriate respect and did not attempt to take

advantage of her needy situation. He addressed her as “daughter” which put him in a position of being a protector and one who would provide care for Ruth. He was also careful to make sure that nothing was done to harm her reputation for having come to the threshing floor as she did.

We also see that Boaz took a very realistic approach in telling Ruth what the alternatives were for them in going forward from that point. He did not paint an overly optimistic picture for her so that her hopes did not become unrealistic expectations. Sometimes, in the spirit of not being negative, we may tend to paint a picture of possible outcomes that are improbable. We certainly want to have a positive approach to life but we have a responsibility to be realistic so that we are not overly disappointed when things don’t “work out” as we might like in an idealized world.

### Exercising Caution Along with Responsibility – 3:14-18

<sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> She said, “These six *measures* of barley he gave to me, for he said, ‘Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’ ” <sup>18</sup> 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.” Ruth 3:14-18 (NASB95)

We need to be constantly aware that whatever we do can likely be misunderstood and misinterpreted by those who are looking for something to criticize. We also need to constantly aware that there are potential dangers around that can harm us if we do not exercise appropriate caution in whatever activity in which we find ourselves involved.

It was still the middle of the night when the mission that Naomi had sent Ruth to accomplish was completed. At that point she could have returned to Naomi; however, there would be danger in doing so since she might encounter someone on the road who could have harmed her. Boaz exercised caution in advising her to remain until daybreak when travel would be safer. Still being cautious, he arranged for her to leave before others awakened so

that there would not be any speculation as to why a woman had come to the threshing floor during the night. Additionally, Boaz gave Ruth several measures of grain to carry home as she returned to Naomi. A woman carrying a bundle of grain early in the morning would be a fairly common sight in that day and would be less curious than a woman just idly walking along the road.

When Ruth arrived back home, Naomi was anxious to hear about the encounter and then she exercised caution in not getting their hopes up too much because the outcome was still uncertain because of the other relative that was closer in kinship to Naomi. However, they did not lose hope since Naomi had complete confidence that Boaz would act quickly to resolve the matter.

### Acting with Integrity – 4:1-6

<sup>1</sup>Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there, and behold, the close relative of whom Boaz spoke was passing by, so he said, “Turn aside, friend, sit down here.” And he turned aside and sat down. <sup>2</sup>He took ten men of the elders of the city and said, “Sit down here.” So they sat down. <sup>3</sup>Then he said to the closest relative, “Naomi, who has come back from the land of Moab, has to sell the piece of land which belonged to our brother Elimelech. <sup>4</sup>“So I thought to inform you, saying, ‘Buy *it* before those who are sitting *here*, and before the elders of my people. If you will redeem *it*, redeem *it*; but if not, tell me that I may know; for there is no one but you to redeem *it*, and I am after you.’” And he said, “I will redeem *it*.” <sup>5</sup>Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the deceased, in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance.” <sup>6</sup>The closest relative said, “I cannot redeem *it* for myself, because I would jeopardize my own inheritance. Redeem *it* for yourself; you *may have* my right of redemption, for I cannot redeem *it*.” Ruth 4:1-6 (NASB95)

Once the issue of redemption had come to the surface, Boaz did not tarry with regard to resolving the questions that needed to be answered. Without making a big deal about obtaining an answer, he went about the process in an orderly and proper way. He arranged to come in contact with the “closer relative” and to bring up the subject of Naomi’s need to sell the land that belonged to Elimelech. It is possible that the land had already been “mortgaged” before Elimelech left for Moab in order to obtain money to survive during the famine. In order to have that piece of land returned to the proper family, a kinsman would need to buy it back or redeem it. During the family’s absence in Moab someone else would have been responsible for the land, but now that the

harvest had been reaped the time had come for Naomi to negotiate the best possible outcome to have the land back under control of Elimelech's family.

There would be some benefit for the closer relative to have control of the land and he was quite agreeable to put up the money to redeem the land. He was ready to embrace the responsibility he had as a member of that family group with regard to committing to bringing the land back into the family. Then Boaz told him the rest of the story. Along with the land, there was also a responsibility of taking care of the widow of Elimelech's son and the need to father a son who would eventually be the heir of that portion of the land. To say the least, that addition really expanded and complicated the level of responsibility that the kinsman would need to take on. This nearest kinsman was not willing to embrace that much responsibility since it would put the rest of his family at risk with regard to their inheritance.

D. A. Carson (*The New Bible Commentary*) points out that Elimelech had a right to an heir. Ruth the Moabitess, his daughter-in-law, was still living, and the man who bought the field had the duty of raising an heir for the dead man through her. If a son were born, the land would revert to him and Elimelech's property would remain in his family. The kinsman would then lose what he had bought and would have another family to take care of. This is why he changed his response to "*I cannot do it.*" The cost was too high. The generosity of Boaz in accepting these financial losses becomes the more apparent.

This raises several questions with regard to how we handle responsibility and how far do we go in taking on responsibility. Sometimes people take on responsibility in a particular area with the idea that doing so will be beneficial to someone else or even to themselves only to discover that the cost of such responsibility is far greater than they ever imagined. We tend to overestimate our ability and resources and to underestimate the cost of taking on more responsibility. Sometimes, the results of not controlling our commitments of how much responsibility we will embrace are that we wind up doing a poor job in many of the areas since we deplete the available resources of time and money. We see this in people who have chosen a lifestyle that requires that they have jobs that demand so much of their time that their families suffer from

neglect. At the same time, many will attempt to live on borrowed money from credit cards rather than saying “no” to acquiring additional responsibility of having more and better things in life. There is wisdom in being able to think through the consequences of our choices and to set our priorities so that we can meet responsibilities in a responsible way.

Could we make the case for saying that the nearest kinsman was negligent in refusing to make the needed sacrifice to help the family of Elimelech? That may be a legitimate argument if there were no other alternatives. However, Boaz had let him know that he was willing to take on the responsibility of the redeemer if he needed to do so. This brings up another facet of our responsibility and that is to determine what other alternatives may be available to help those in need. As it turned out, Boaz was a better choice for taking on the responsibility to be the kinsman redeemer.

#### Embracing a Secure Future – 4:7-12

<sup>7</sup>Now this was *the custom* in former times in Israel concerning the redemption and the exchange of *land* to confirm any matter: a man removed his sandal and gave it to another; and this was the *manner of attestation* in Israel. <sup>8</sup>So the closest relative said to Boaz, “Buy *it* for yourself.” And he removed his sandal. <sup>9</sup>Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses today that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. <sup>10</sup>“Moreover, I have acquired Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, to be my wife in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance, so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off from his brothers or from the court of his *birth* place; you are witnesses today.” <sup>11</sup>All the people who were in the court, and the elders, said, “*We are* witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; and may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem. <sup>12</sup>“Moreover, may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the LORD will give you by this young woman.” Ruth 4:7-12 (NASB95)

After the encounter with the older relative of Naomi's and his refusal to exercise his option, then Boaz declared his intent in front of the witnesses. He took the responsibility for all the land and possession of Elimelech and that which would normally go to his two sons, all of which were then deceased. He also took on the responsibility of Ruth the wife of Mahlon and to raise up children to perpetuate the name of that family. Notice that the reason given

was that the “name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren.” This preoccupation with preserving the name of a person may have been related to their idea of what “eternal life” was all about in that day and time.

This was a time of rejoicing for all those there that witnessed the transaction. There was a call for the blessing of God to be upon this union. Notice what was important to these people. First, there was a need for a large family. The reference to Rachael and Leah recalls the fact that they and their handmaids bore 12 children to Jacob which grew into the nation of Israel. Part of this desire for a large family had to do with economics in the agricultural economy that they were in. Also, as was mentioned earlier, children were security for the ageing. Second, there was the importance of having a good name, or as they put it to be famous at least in his hometown. The reference to Pharez and Tamar recalls the fact that foreign women had been taken as wives before by their ancestors and the results had worked out well.

Our values have changed somewhat in this day and age. To have a very large family is thought to be irresponsible by some people. Many are concerned about the earth being overpopulated and there not being enough food. I really don't think that we have a lot to worry about. Another change is that in many instances, children do not take care of their parents in their later years. I remember reading in about an elderly gentleman that celebrated his 91st birthday by waiting all day long for some of his children to come see him. All of his children lived within five miles of the rooming house where he lived. He waited all day and not one of the children came. Times have really changed. The importance of a good name is not as highly esteemed as it once was. I think that this is a change for the worse in our culture. The society in which Boaz lived was one in which marriage outside of one's nationality and religion was uncommon. Nowadays when young people get married, the place of commonalty of religious beliefs is not high on the agenda. For non-Christians, this is understandable. However, for Christian youth, it is a formula for grief and sadness.

### Rewards of Fulfilled Responsibility – 4:13-17

<sup>13</sup> So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. <sup>14</sup> Then the women

said to Naomi, “Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. <sup>15</sup>“May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” <sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. <sup>17</sup> The neighbor women gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi!” So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David. Ruth 4:13-17 (NASB95)

The community of support seemed to be focused toward Naomi. She was the person most at risk in the society in which she lived and the child that was born to Boaz and Ruth represented security and preservation of the family name. There was also recognition of the devotion of Ruth to Naomi. This type of care of one person for another is commendable and God blesses those relationships with fulfilled hope.

Usually it is impossible to “second guess” what God is doing. Earlier in her life, Naomi was bitter toward God for the loss of her husband and her sons. She was bitter because of her lot in life. Yet we can see that God was at work in all of what had happened. He provided comfort and help for her during her loss and at the same time worked out a message for the rest of us regarding his acceptance of all people.

God was at work in this union of Ruth and Boaz. He blessed their marriage with a son who was the grandfather of king David. God included non-Jews in the lineage of the Messiah. The “non-chosen” people were always included in His plan and purpose. When Jesus told Nicodemus what God was doing, He indicated that God so love the world – all the people – that whosoever believed on Him might not perish but have everlasting life. We must always be careful to not exclude anyone for any reason since we may find ourselves at odds with what God is doing.