

GROWING CLOSER TO TRUE SECURITY
RUTH 2:17-3:5

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Years ago the *Boston Globe* (5/28/1980) reported on a robbery which happened at the Depositors Trust Company in Medford, Massachusetts. Thieves had broken into the vault and rifled through safe deposit boxes. A police officer stood guard outside of the bank and had to deal with upset customers who were coming to check on their valuables.

“I lost everything, all the personal mementos that my husband gave me before he died,” said one sobbing woman. The officer told the reporter, **“You feel bad for them. A lot of people are telling me they just took out a safe deposit box because they were afraid someone would break into their home and rob them, and now this.”**

One local woman asked, **“Where is anything safe?”** Another observed, **“Our homes get broken into--- mine was broken into twice. And now the banks get broken into.”**

Much of our motivation in life comes from a desire to obtain security. We want not only protection for our valuables but also for our personal safety. We also want protection from the elements. So we work for food and shelter and clothing. We have sought security from illness and death as we worked our way through the recent Covid pandemic. We seek a certain kind of security in the purchase of life insurance and car insurance and health insurance and homeowner’s insurance. We invest in retirement plans. We want our government to provide us with security from crime and from foreign enemies. We also expect government to provide us unemployment coverage when we need it, to provide us with Social Security in our old age, and to protect us from prices which rise faster than wages. We seek for another kind of security in finding marriage partners and raising families. Most of us here also look for some kind of security beyond the grave.

One of the lessons of the Bible is that the best security is found in a relationship with the living God. Too often we seek ultimate security in people or things. In the process we violate God’s directions about how we ought to live life.

The Melech family learned some hard lessons about this. We have seen that this Hebrew family lived over a thousand years before the time of Christ. (PROJECTOR ON-- BETHLEHEM TO MOAB MAP) When a famine struck the town of Bethlehem and the tribe of Judah, this family acted contrary to the directions of the Old Testament to stay in the Promised Land. They went over into enemy territory to find what they hoped would be security from the famine. They lived in the land of Moab.

They apparently found food there. But their sons married Moabite women. They provided no children. Naomi's husband died. Then her two sons died. Naomi became a bitter woman. In spite of her attitude, one daughter-in-law chose to follow her back to Bethlehem and even to become a worshiper of her God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Last time we saw that Ruth stepped out on faith to glean behind the reapers of the barley harvest. She providentially ended up in the field of a godly guy named Boaz who saw to it that she got an extremely generous supply of barley.

I.

So we take up our story today in vv. 17 & 18 of Ruth #2 (p. 223) as we find that RUTH'S FAITH RESULTS IN THE BLESSING OF PHYSICAL SECURITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. RUTH'S FAITH RESULTS IN...) Ruth is a foreigner, a Moabite. She is an unattached woman. The moral climate of the day is not good. But if Naomi and Ruth are going to survive upon their return to Bethlehem, somebody needs to get to work. So Ruth follows the ancient custom of gleaning. She goes out into a field and follows the barley reapers to collect the leftovers.

It turns out that Boaz is the owner of the field. He happens to show up on this day. He knows the story of Naomi and Ruth. He is a godly guy. He is generous to this foreign woman and makes sure that she is supplied with extra grain.

We take up the story in v. 17 of #2: **“So she [Ruth] gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley.”** This is an industrious woman. Boaz has also been generous. At the end of the day she uses a stick or some kind of hammer to beat on the barley on hard ground or upon a nearby threshing floor. The grain is separated from the husks, and Ruth takes the good stuff home.

Ruth has what the narrator describes as an ephah of barley. There is uncertainty about the standard of measure back in these times. The majority of scholars think that an ephah was equivalent to 29 pounds. We have an ancient record from the nearby civilization at Mari which says that the wages of male workers varied from one to two pounds of grain per day. So in just this one day Ruth has ended up with several weeks worth of food. This is a rather amazing provision. There is the promise of more to come.

According to v. 18, **“And she took it up and went into the city. Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied.”** The two widows were staying in Bethlehem. I suspect that Naomi was worried about what happened to Ruth. The daughter-in-law did not return until later in the day. But when she showed up, Naomi had to be amazed to see what Ruth had collected. The text also implies that Ruth had leftovers to share from her noon meal with Boaz. This bitter old woman can not help but see the evidence of God's providential care. Her daughter-in-law has stepped out in faith, and the result has been the provision of food and the blessing of physical security.

II.

In vv. 19-23 of #2 we find that NAOMI DISCOVERS THE PROVISION OF DIVINE SECURITY. (II. NAOMI DISCOVERS THE PROVISION...) We read in v. 19: **“And her mother-in-law said to her, ‘Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.’ So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, ‘The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz.’”**

Naomi is shocked at what Ruth has brought home. This was not a normal haul from gleaners. Normally they got leftovers which were barely enough to provide for an individual or a family. Ruth has come home with three weeks worth of groceries. Naomi naturally wants to know where she worked and who was the source of her bounty. The drama is heightened as the name is not released until the last word in the Hebrew verse. It is Boaz.

Naomi's perspective on God is interesting. Her family has made unbiblical choices. She seems unable to recognize that and/or unwilling to admit it. The result is that she has become bitter toward God. She thinks that He is unloving and unfair. Yet she still maintains a belief in the God of Israel. She acknowledges His sovereignty. She invokes His name in blessings. Here she calls for a blessing upon Boaz. She cannot help but recognize that this day of blessing points toward the providential care of God. Likewise, God sometimes blesses us, even when we are bitter toward Him, even when we have not been very careful to follow His directions.

Verse 20: **“And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, ‘May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!’ Naomi also said to her, ‘The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers.’”** Again Naomi utters another prayer of blessing.

The technical question here is who is it whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead--- is it the Lord or Boaz? Certainly the Lord has been at work behind the scenes, but the scholars generally think that Naomi is here focusing on Boaz. There is no other Old Testament reference to YHWH demonstrating love toward the dead. So the idea is probably that Boaz has shown kindness to the living and the dead in the sense that he has given extra provision of food for Ruth and Naomi, who are representative of the whole Melech family. Boaz is honoring the connection which he has to this extended part of the family.

In describing the actions of Boaz, Naomi uses another important Old Testament word. The Hebrew word is *chesed*. (CHESSED) It refers to more than just kindness. It is used in the Hebrew Bible to include the ideas of love, mercy, grace, and loyalty. Boaz has demonstrated *chesed* toward Naomi and Ruth not only in his generosity but also in his loyalty toward extended family.

The word is used often of God's actions toward His people. For example, (EXODUS 34:6-7) in Exodus #34 vv. 6-7 the Lord appears to Moses and we have this description:

“The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...” Thus this term is variously translated as “loving kindness” and “steadfast love.”

Verse 20 in our passage provides a further identification of the status of Boaz in terms of his relationship to the Melech family. He is called a “redeemer.” The word in Hebrew is *go’el*. (GO’EL) Boaz is not just a relative, he is a *go’el*. This was a relative who was close enough to a part of the extended family that he had certain responsibilities according to the Law of Moses. One example of this concerned Hebrews who sold themselves into slavery in order to pay off debts. In Leviticus #25 vv. 48 & 49 (LEVITICUS 25:48-59) we read, **“...then after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him, 49 or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him.”**

A *go’el* might also buy back property to keep the inheritance in the family. He was charged with the responsibility to track down and kill someone who had murdered a close relative. He could assist a clan member in a lawsuit to insure that justice was done. The basic meaning of the term is “one who buys back, or redeems.”
(PROJECTOR OFF)

The specific term is not used in Deuteronomy #25. But the basic idea is implied. The law says there that if a man dies without leaving a son to inherit his estate, it is the responsibility of a brother to marry the widow. The first son from that marriage inherits the deceased man’s estate.

So the status of Boaz as a *go’el* toward the Melech family opens up all kinds of possibilities. This is a destitute family. We are not clear about the ancient understanding of the details of this responsibility. It doesn’t seem that Boaz suddenly has total responsibility for this family. There appear to be other relatives around. But Boaz will become involved. All of this is news to Ruth at the conclusion of this long day for her. She has seen first hand evidence of the loving kindness of Boaz.

In v. 21 we have this additional note from Ruth: **“And Ruth the Moabite said, ‘Besides, he said to me, “You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.””** Boaz wants Ruth to stay with his harvesting crew. This means protection and continued provision. The wheat harvest immediately followed the barley harvest. So the two harvests together lasted for about seven weeks. Ruth is being treated like family.

Verse 22: **“And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, ‘It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted.”** Naomi’s comment is a reminder about the moral and spiritual climate of the time. Ruth has extra vulnerability as a young woman, as an unattached woman, and as a foreigner.

Verse 23: **“So she kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law.”** This seven week harvest period ended in early June. The harvests were done then for several months. Ruth remained with her mother-in-law in Bethlehem. At this point we are left hanging. Is anything more going to come of this relationship of Ruth and Naomi to Boaz?

Naomi in the midst of her tragic situation had been resistant to evidence of the *chesed*, the kindness, of God. But the providential care of God is finally breaking through to her. The Lord is providing security for her and for her daughter-in-law.

In the midst of hard times that we experience, we are likewise tempted to blame God, to see Him as unloving and unjust. But the loving God is there. Sometimes He reveals Himself through other people--- through people who serve as a kind of *go'el*, a redeemer for us. The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus Christ is available to us as a *go'el*. (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 3:13) In Galatians #3 v. 13 we are told, **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’”**. Our greatest problem is sin and its consequences for us. The good news is that Jesus died in our place as our substitute for the consequences of our sin. Because He is our redeemer, our *go'el*, we can have forgiveness and eternal life simply by trusting in Him. That is the best security that we can ever have.

III.

We come then to # 3 and vv. 1-5. There we find that NAOMI PROMOTES AN APPROACH TO A RIGHT SOURCE OF SECURITY IN A WRONG WAY. (III. NAOMI PROMOTES AN APPROACH TO...) Time apparently goes by, and there is no further development of the relationship between Boaz and the Melech family. There is no specific indication that Boaz even meets Naomi, although that may have happened. Both Ruth and Naomi have been well provisioned as a result of the generosity of Boaz. But with the harvest season coming to an end, we wonder about what more is going to come of this family connection.

So we read in v. 1 of #3: **“Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?’”** The NAS translation has “security” in place of “rest.” The Hebrew word includes both ideas. Life has been very insecure for both Naomi and Ruth. Perhaps Naomi is totally focused on Ruth’s security. The reality is that security for Ruth may also have security implications for Naomi. We don’t know what Naomi’s motives are. Unlike what we have in so much of modern journalism the narrator in this book is providing us with straight reporting.

Boaz seems not to have taken any further initiative in dealing with other insecurities that Ruth and Naomi might have. There is no evidence of involvement by Boaz in inquiring about an heir for the family, or disposition of property rights, or a possible husband for Ruth. Arranging a marriage for eligible young people in that culture was typically regarded as a parental responsibility. It was essential to long term security for a young

woman. Boaz obviously offers a lot of security. He is also a godly guy. But he appears to be considerably older than Ruth. Naomi begins to formulate a plan.

According to v. 2 Naomi says to Ruth, **“Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor.”** The barley harvest was concluded before the wheat harvest was begun. Why is it only now that the barley is being winnowed? Perhaps the winnowing for both crops happened only at the conclusion of the second harvest.

Essential to this process was a threshing floor. (THRESHING FLOOR) Remains of these threshing floors are still visible in Israel today. Sometimes threshing floors were just hard ground. Sometimes they were set on bedrock. Grain was placed on these spaces. Then sledges or cart wheels or animals walking on the confined space were used to crush the grain and separate the kernels from the husks. Then a fork or shovel was used to toss the mixture up in the air. Often it was in the evening in this part of the world when winds would come up. The wind would serve to blow off the husks and chaff. The kernels were piled up and saved for food. The straw was used for animal fodder, and the chaff was used for fuel. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It is understandable that Boaz might be winnowing the barley in the evening. But it is unclear why he would stay at the site of this threshing. Perhaps it was to guard the grain. But then we might wonder why this wealthy man did not use his paid help to do that. Some speculate that there was some kind of celebration involved with the end of the harvest or perhaps some kind of religious ritual that took place. We don't know enough about the ancient situation to be certain.

Naomi continues her instructions in v. 3: **“Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.”** Naomi wants to make Ruth as presentable as possible. She wants her to look good and smell good. I suspect that Ruth had a limited wardrobe. Some scholars wonder if she had been wearing the clothing of a widow. Such clothing might immediately have indicated to barley harvesters that she qualified to glean in fields after reapers. Perhaps widows garments would have indicated to Boaz that she was not ready for any romantic relationship.

Naomi wants Ruth to show up secretly and at the right time. She wants Ruth to be on the scene after Boaz has finished eating and drinking. The drink would probably have included wine. But it does not mean that Boaz would be drunk. He would just be content and tired at the end of the day.

Ruth continues her instruction in v. 4: **“But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.”** So apparently Ruth is supposed to sneak up on Boaz in the dark, pull up the edge of his robe, and cuddle up next to him. Then she is supposed to wait for him to make the next move.

What are we to make of this? Again, the narrator is giving us straight reporting without any commentary. We also don't have complete knowledge about the customs of the times. But can you imagine sending your daughter off on this kind of a mission? Even if Ruth is being sent off to someone who is a really great guy, would you want your daughter to cuddle up to him in the middle of the night? Would you be confident that a man would not take advantage of a situation like this?

It seems to me that this is a strategy that is more consistent with a culture in which everyone does what is right in his own eyes than one that is based on Biblical values. People in our world too often encourage women to use sex to catch the guy whom they want. People in our world think that it is normal for couples to live together to test things out before making a decision about getting married.

Even if Boaz is a great guy, it seems to me that Naomi is encouraging an approach that is contrary to godly methodology. She wants this connection to be made in the dark and in secret. She seems to be encouraging Ruth to catch Boaz in a vulnerable moment, when he is sleeping and after he has eaten a full meal. Normally it appears that arranged marriages in Biblical times were set up in the open. If inheritance and estate issues were a crucial part of this potential marriage, it would seem that these issues should have been brought up in a legal atmosphere, which typically meant a meeting at the gates of the city with the leaders of the community. Then also Naomi's approach seems not to be reflecting a trust in the providence of God. It appears that she is following a strategy whereby the end justifies the means.

According to v. 5, Ruth goes along with Naomi's instructions. **“And she replied, ‘All that you say I will do.’”** Even if Ruth had some doubts about this approach, she may have felt limited in her options. She is living in a different country in a somewhat different culture. She is at the bottom of social standings. Boaz does have important things to offer. He is a man of importance and wealth. He is a kind man who has shown kindness toward Ruth. Did Ruth have romantic feelings toward him? We don't know. He was considerably older than she was.

At this point in the story, without reading ahead, the situation seems risky. Boaz could just take advantage of the situation and have relations with Ruth. This could be a one night stand. He could treat her as a low class servant and mistress. He could take offense at this whole approach and tell Ruth to get out. We will have to stay tuned to next time to see what happens.

But still we can see in this story up to this point that God has been graciously bringing all of these characters together in the midst of difficult circumstances to provide a potentially good outcome. Ruth and Naomi are especially looking for security in the midst of an insecure world. One of the things that He is seeking to develop in them, and that He is seeking to develop in us, is an inner conviction that the ultimate security in life can only be achieved by trusting in Him.

Joy was born in 1915 in New York City. Her parents were Jewish and Polish on one side and Jewish and Ukrainian on the other side. She grew up in a pretty secure environment. Her parents were employed right through the Great Depression. This Bronx native was blessed with considerable natural talents. She was a child prodigy in the realms of music and literature. On one occasion she looked at a music piece from Chopin and sat down at the piano and played it without having to look at the music again.

Joy received a BA degree from Hunter College in New York when she was just nineteen. Then she got an MA from Columbia. She won a prestigious poetry award from Yale. She developed an interest in politics and joined the American Communist Party in 1938. She became a movie reviewer for a Communist magazine and continued to write on the side.

Joy met and married William, a fellow writer and Communist in 1942. They had two sons. William and Joy began to become disillusioned with Communism. They also began to have problems in their marriage. William was an alcoholic, and he began to chase other women. For the first time in her life Joy felt a considerable amount of insecurity. She later wrote, “...**for the first time my pride was forced to admit that I was not, after all, 'the master of my fate'..**” Bill called Joy one night from his office and said that he was having a nervous breakdown. He hung up and would not return her calls. This atheist said that at that moment she felt another presence in the room and found herself praying on her knees.

Thus began her spiritual quest. Joy became exposed to the writings of CS Lewis. They were largely influential in drawing her to become a Christian. She went to visit CS Lewis in England in 1952. He found Joy to be a stimulating intellectual companion. Joy was divorced in 1954. She returned to England and continued to develop a relationship with CS Lewis. He was a Boaz-like figure to her. He was seventeen years her senior and seemingly a confirmed bachelor.

When the government said that Joy and her sons had to return to the US because their visa was expiring, CS Lewis agreed to marry her in a civil ceremony. They lived separately after that. But a year later Joy fell and broke her leg. It was discovered that she had terminal cancer. CS Lewis by this point truly fell in love with Joy. They were married in a Christian ceremony in 1957. CS Lewis cared for her and her two sons. Joy died in 1960. That loss prompted his writing of the book *A Grief Observed*. He had written on her tombstone this epitaph:

**Here the whole world (stars, water, air,
And field, and forest, as they were
Reflected in a single mind)
Like cast off clothes was left behind
In ashes, yet with hopes that she,
Re-born from holy poverty,
In lenten lands, hereafter may
Resume them on her Easter Day**

Joy found her ultimate security in a relationship with God through faith in Jesus. But a good man also provided security for her and her sons. Three years later CS Lewis died. His passing was overshadowed by the death of an American across the pond on the same day. That American was John F. Kennedy.

Our best source of security is the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. By trusting in Jesus we can have eternal security. At the same time we have the ability through faith in God to be Boaz-like people to our mates and our families and needy people around us. Through God's work in us we can offer meaningful security to others. We can also point them to the ultimate source of security.

We just need to keep in mind that no human can give us ultimate security. Our ultimate trust needs to be in the Triune God. Putting anything or anyone else in that position is to make an idol., and idols will always end up disappointing us.