

Ruth was a foreigner. Not just any foreigner, but a Moabite - a native of a country that Israelites practically equated with gross immorality. Long ago in Genesis, Lot and his two daughters had fled Sodom as it was being destroyed and found refuge in a cave. Realizing that their prospects of having children were considerably damaged by Sodom's demise - their fiancées had died in the destruction - the daughters came up with a plan. They would get their father drunk on successive nights and take turns sleeping with him. Their plan worked, they each got pregnant and the older daughter bore a son named Moab. And all of the Moabites, including Ruth, inherited the stigma of that sordid, incestuous affair.

As the book of Ruth opens, an Israelite woman named Naomi who is living in Moab has recently suffered the loss of her husband and two sons. Her two young daughters-in-law are both Moabites and now widows. Lacking any family support structure in Moab, Naomi decides to return to her homeland. Ruth insists on coming with her and making a new life in her deceased husband's homeland. She abandons the gods of Moab to attach herself to Israel and Israel's God.

But Ruth was childless when her husband died, and she can't really be grafted into the nation of Israel without bearing Israelite children. She needs a new husband from her dead husband's extended family. And she finds herself drawn to an older gentleman named Boaz. He's financially comfortable, well respected, and very kind to her. She probably hasn't received much mercy in Israel yet; she's an alien from the land of corruption, obviously cursed by her gods since her husband was taken from her at such a young age. But

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Boaz notices her hard work in the fields and hears the story of her faithfulness to Naomi and Israel's God. She might have been harmed in other fields, Naomi tells her, but Boaz's field is safe. She feels the warmth of his kindness.

Naomi comes up with a plan to plant a suggestion in Boaz's mind to marry Ruth. It involves some boldness on Ruth's part, but to go to him in the middle of the night and to initiate her own marriage. But Ruth is up to the challenge and even takes it a step further. In a passage that uses quite a bit of sexual innuendo to suggest the

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sexual tension in the situation. Ruth uncovers Boaz and asks him to spread his garment over her. She even appeals to Deuteronomic laws of remarriage, making it clear what her intentions are. This is a bona fide marriage proposal.

Though we can assume that no immorality occurred on the threshing floor in the middle of the night, the book of Ruth is a rather racy story for the time and culture in which it was written. There are echoes of Ruth's ancestry - a young woman approaching an older man in his sleep after he's had a lot to drink, just as Lot's daughters once did - as well as a stretching of current cultural norms.

### Read Ruth 3:1-14

What do you think of Ruth's proposal?

Godly people of any age, if they understood the nuances, would experience real tension between what they knew to be God's law and what they read in this story. It just doesn't look like something God would approve of.

Imagine Ruth in a women's community group. What would the members say to her?

"Ruth, it's the man's job to pursue and the woman's job to play hard-to-get. That way you weed out the guys who aren't serious about a relationship from the one who's deeply in love with you. This is how God designed us. You can't just throw yourself at a man like that."

"Yeah, that just reeks of immodesty. Brazen seduction. He may have been flattered, but he won't trust you later."

"Do you know what people think when they see a young woman with an older man? do you really want to go through life with all those raised eyebrows around you? And if you have kids, think about how old he'll be when they're teenagers."

"You're leaving yourself open to all kinds of gossip with that kind of behavior"

"Not even a hint of immorality, Ruth. Not even a hint. You should know better than that."

How do you think you'd react?  
What would you say to Ruth?

In all of our advice, of course, we'd miss out on the beauty of an exciting romance that mirrors God's compassion and love. We'd allow it to be overshadowed by the scandalous implications.

No actual sin occurred in this romance, but hints of impropriety certainly did. And when we see hints of impropriety, issue of righteousness take center stage. All other issues are ignored.

We are able to see the real meaning of Ruth today because it has the approval of the Holy Spirit as part of sacred Scripture and because we can see God's hand in how the story worked out. But would we have that same sense of appreciation if Ruth were playing at the local theater and we weren't already familiar with the story?

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We need to develop the kind of heart that recognizes the voice and the movements of God at first sight rather than figuring out it was him after he's already passed by. We need a system of beliefs that not only acknowledges God's work in history but expects him to work today. We should want the kind of theology that allows God to unfold his stories right in front of our eyes without beating the life out of them with questions and skepticism and judgements. Do we want to be the kind of believers who honor the prophets in hindsight but would have thrown rocks at them in their time? That's the history of Israel and, to be honest, most of the church. But that's not the kind of faith God honors his presence and power.

What kind of faith do you have?

Is this the kind of faith you want to have?

No, God honors the kind of faith that Clarence Jordan had in establishing Koinoia Farm in south Georgia in the 1940s as a racially integrated community with Sermon on the Mount ethics. That's radical and bold. At that time and place, the biblical principles of Jordan's vision were considered by many Christians to be decidedly unbiblical and even sinful. So some of the fine Christians who opposed him decided to respond with bombings and other acts of violence (in the name of God, of course) just as certain priests and teachers condemned Jesus to die for the sake of protecting God's chosen people from both heresy and the wrath of Rome. Jordan had Kingdom faith, which almost always draws attacks from those who can't tell the difference between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom in their own head.

And God honors Ruth's kind of faith: honest, sacrificial, risky, bold, unconventional. We know he honors it because her story is in the Bible. She became the great-grandmother of King David and a member of the lineage of Jesus. Whenever we get too judgmental about someone who appears "inappropriate," we should remember that the Messiah's genealogy wouldn't have looked the same if Ruth hadn't cast aside her stigmas and lain next to a man in the middle of the night.

Notes: