

August 18 Lesson 12 (NIV)

A COVENANT TO MARRY

DEVOTIONAL READING: Hebrews 13:1–8

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ruth 1:6–18; 3; 4; Matthew 19:1–12

RUTH 3:1–6, 8–12, 16–18

¹ One day Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi said to her, “My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. ² Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³ Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

⁵ “I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered. ⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

⁸ In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet!

⁹ “Who are you?” he asked.

“I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

¹⁰ “The LORD bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor.

¹¹ And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. ¹² Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I.”

¹⁶ When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, “How did it go, my daughter?”

Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her ¹⁷ and added, “He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’ ”

¹⁸ Then Naomi said, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.”

KEY VERSE

“The LORD bless you, my daughter,” [Boaz] replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier.”—Ruth 3:10

COVENANT IN GOD

Unit 3: Covenant: A Personal Perspective

LESSONS 10–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. State the purpose of Ruth’s visit to Boaz’s threshing floor.
2. Explain how, in light of cultural context, the actions of Ruth and Boaz were conducted with complete integrity.
3. Identify one way to show greater integrity in relationships, and make a plan to implement it personally.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Manipulative Models
- B. Lesson Context
- I. At Home (RUTH 3:1–6)
 - A. Naomi’s Commands (vv. 1–4)
 - B. Ruth’s Compliance (vv. 5, 6)
Trusting Wise Counsel
- II. At the Threshing Floor (RUTH 3:8–12)
 - A. Ruth’s Proposal (vv. 8, 9)
 - B. Boaz’s Prospects (vv. 10–12)
Choosing Integrity
- III. At Home Again (RUTH 3:16–18)
 - A. Ruth’s Account (vv. 16, 17)
 - B. Naomi’s Advice (v. 18)

Conclusion

- A. Good Models Are Hard to Find
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

AbimelekUh-*bim*-eh-lek.

BoazBo-*az*.

DeuteronomyDue-ter-*ahn*-uh-me.

ElimelekEe-*lim*-eh-leck.

levirate*leh*-vuh-rut.

Leviticus *Leh-vit-ih-kus*.

Moab *Mo-ab*.

Nehemiah *Nee-huh-my-uh*.

Philistines *Fuh-liss-teenz* or *Fill-us-teenz*.

Introduction

A. Manipulative Models

The movie *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* puts its romantic leads at the mercy of one another. The two meet and immediately begin manipulating one another to win secret bets with their friends. Though they enjoy being together, proving their friends wrong consistently trumps kindness and honesty. Both win their bets, but their self-serving tactics leave the couple deeply hurt. In real life, two people would walk away from this broken relationship.

Selfishness abounds in human affairs, and the pages of Scripture contain many examples. In the period of the judges, we find such examples as Abimelek, who sought the kingship for himself (Judges 9), and Samson, whose narcissistic encounters with the Philistines often served himself instead of Israel (Judges 14–16).

Fortunately, though, people are not always selfish. The book of Ruth portrays several characters who demonstrate selflessness and integrity in their relationships. These characters draw their integrity from the character of the God who works through their actions to advance his benevolent purposes.

B. Lesson Context

Because Ruth had left her home country out of loyalty to her mother-in-law (see Lesson 11), Naomi viewed Ruth's future security as her own responsibility. Ordinarily, a woman's father or other male relatives would arrange her marriage and protect her. This unusual state of affairs left the two women to provide for themselves.

Naomi gave her daughter-in-law her blessing to go into the neighbors' fields and seek permission to glean there to provide for them both (Ruth 2; compare Leviticus 19:9, 10). Ruth ended up in the field of Boaz, a close relative of Naomi's deceased husband, whom the text introduces as a man of standing in his town (Ruth 2:1). Spiritually sensitive readers recognize the providential hand of God in the events (2:3). In due course, Boaz met Ruth and praised her acts of kindness to Naomi. He invoked God's blessing on her and made sure she was safe and provided for during the harvest.

Because this lesson focuses on Ruth's proposal to Boaz, we must address the questionable legality of marriage between an Israelite and a Moabite. The law included certain restrictions about a Moabite not being part of "the assembly of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 23:3; compare Nehemiah 13:1). Such exclusion suggests a prohibition against intermarriage because the offspring of this union would never be included in the spiritual life of Israel.

Centuries later during the time of Ezra, intermarriages with non-Israelites were considered a threat to the purity of the covenant people. Following the Babylonian captivity, the returned exiles were especially aware of the importance of remaining separate from idolatrous influences. The leadership of the community took action to dissolve such marriages (Ezra 9:1, 2; 10:1–5; compare Nehemiah 13:23–27). This separation would help ensure that the Israelites would not become guilty (again) of the sins that had led to the captivity (see Deuteronomy 6:13–15; compare Jeremiah 19:4, 5).

Ruth had affirmed without reservation her allegiance to the God of Israel and severed ties with Moab (Ruth 1:16, 17). One might say she had been adopted into the covenant people. Thus, despite her Moabite nationality, there was no danger of her turning the family line of Elimelek (Naomi's husband) to foreign and false gods.

Because she had embraced God alone, Ruth needed to follow his laws for his people. The need for Ruth to remarry stems from the directive to bear a child for her deceased husband (see Deuteronomy 25:5–10). This practice ensured that the dead man's legacy did not die with him. The practice also provided for the widow. She gained both a husband and a child through the practice of levirate marriage (see Lesson 11 on Ruth 1:11).

Though the concept of kinship is important throughout the Bible, the book of Ruth explores extensively themes of covenantal loyalty within the family. Duties within the family include buying back land sold in times of emergency (Leviticus 25:25–27; Ruth 4:2–6), redeeming family members sold into debt slavery (Leviticus 25:47–49), and avenging murder (Numbers 35:19). For Ruth, the most important kinship obligation was that of levirate marriage (see commentary on Ruth 3:9b below).

I. At Home (RUTH 3:1–6)

A. Naomi's Commands (vv. 1–4)

1. One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for."

Naomi responds to Ruth's expressions of loyalty by answering in kind (see Ruth 1:14–17). She embraces her duty to help Ruth *be well provided for*, which would include finding her a secure home (see Deuteronomy 28:65; 1 Chronicles 6:31; Lamentations 1:3). Security for Ruth means finding a husband. Naomi chooses the harvest season (Ruth 2:2, 23, below)—a time of fertility, divine favor, and renewed hope—to move to help Ruth.

2a. "Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours."

The text does not say exactly how *Boaz* is related to Naomi's late husband (Ruth 2:1), but Naomi views Boaz's kinship as fortuitous. The fact that he is *a relative* makes him a desirable candidate for marriage to Ruth (see comments on Ruth 3:9b, below).

2b. "Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor."

The scene Naomi describes unfolds one night during the barley harvest. Boaz *will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor*. Such a place is located in the open, outside the city (see Judges 6:37). The winnowing process involves tossing threshed grain into the air so that the wind can blow away the chaff (compare Judges 6:11; Isaiah 41:16; Jeremiah 4:11, 12; Luke 3:17).

3a. “Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor,

Bathing is not an everyday practice in ancient Israel. Boaz and his fellow workers likely do not *wash* after their day’s work. To *put on perfume* in addition to bathing marks a special occasion. Naomi further tells Ruth to take care when dressing. Taken altogether, Naomi’s instructions signal to Ruth that tonight is the night to shed the attire of mourning (compare 2 Samuel 12:20; 14:2; Isaiah 61:3), put on regular garments, and present herself as an eligible bride (compare Ezekiel 16:8–12).

3b. “but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking.

Naomi anticipates that Boaz will celebrate the harvest with food and drink (see Exodus 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:13–16; Isaiah 9:3). A woman approaching a man at night is highly suspect, so Naomi advises Ruth to be cautious, not letting Boaz or anyone else become aware of her presence too soon. Her visit to the threshing floor is only for Boaz to discover, no one else (see Ruth 3:14).

4. “When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

After Boaz has a good meal and is in a good mood, he will fall asleep near the grain. Then the time will be right for Ruth to make her approach. But with what intent exactly? To seduce a drunken Boaz, in a fashion not unlike Lot’s daughters, from which Ruth’s people descended (Genesis 19:30–38)? Some opt for this interpretation, and not without reason. Besides the historical precedent, the narrative thus far contains several Hebrew words that are often imbued with sexual connotations: *lie down* and *uncover*. To lie down together is a common euphemism for sexual intercourse. Additionally, the Hebrew term *feet* is used as a euphemism for male genitalia (see 1 Samuel 24:3; Isaiah 7:20 in the *King James Version*). The writer builds tension and highlights the risk involved in this nighttime scene without spelling out exactly what Naomi expects of Ruth.

The narrative as a whole speaks against the possibility that Naomi intends for an illicit encounter to occur. No doubt she uses Ruth’s youth and attractiveness to advantage, and the encounter includes an element of sexual allure. Even so, the narrative portrays the characters as exceptionally virtuous, with integrity and faithfulness to God. Nothing in Boaz’s actions thus far suggests that he will respond favorably to Ruth if she presents herself as a common prostitute (compare Genesis 38:15, 16).

The sexual overtones of the story notwithstanding, it is better to assume that Ruth presents herself to Boaz as a woman who has moved past her bereavement and is now available for remarriage. Naomi mitigates the risk of proposing the match to Boaz by sending Ruth herself to open his eyes to the possibility of marriage. Because of their common bond of faith in the God of Israel, Boaz and Ruth will not be, to use Paul’s language, “yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6:14).

B. Ruth’s Compliance (vv. 5, 6)

5, 6. “I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered. So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

Though Ruth had earlier refused her mother-in-law’s advice and guidance (Ruth 1:8–17), here she consents to follow her instructions fully (see Ephesians 6:1; Colossians 3:20). Both her disobedience and obedience result from her love for Naomi. Ruth recognizes Naomi’s rightful role as her matchmaker in this circumstance. Naomi, who earlier found herself at odds with the Almighty (Ruth 1:13, 20, 21), sees him at work behind the scenes.

II. At the Threshing Floor (RUTH 3:8–12)

A. Ruth's Proposal (vv. 8, 9)

8. In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet!

Some hours later, Ruth approaches Boaz quietly and uncovers his *feet* or some portion of his lower body (Ruth 3:7, not in today's text). Given his grogginess, the darkness, and the insecure situation of sleeping out in the open, Boaz is *startled*. But soon he perceives *a woman lying at his feet*, perhaps after catching the aroma of perfume. But how does Boaz know that his visitor is not a prostitute who has come from town to offer her services?

9a. “Who are you?” he asked.

This is the natural question to determine the woman's identity and, along with it, her intentions. That Boaz knows his visitor to be a woman is confirmed by his use of the word *you*, since it is feminine in Hebrew.

9b. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said.

Ruth gives her name, but does not refer to herself as a foreigner (as in Ruth 2:10), nor does she call herself a Moabite (compare 1:22; 2:2, 21; 4:5, 10). Her self-designation as *your servant* is the position of a female handmaid (compare 2:13). This is the first signal to Boaz that Ruth desires marriage.

9c. “Spread the corner of your garment over me,

This request presumably refers to the gathered portion of clothing that previously covered Boaz's legs. The Hebrew metaphorically calls this garment Boaz's “wing”; thus Ruth plays on his earlier comment that she has found security and refuge under the “wings” of the God of Israel (Ruth 2:12; compare Ezekiel 16:8). Ruth intimates that she has faith in God's provision. Furthermore, she views Boaz as the instrument in the hands of God to protect and provide for her.

9d. “since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

This fact makes Boaz eligible for a levirate marriage with Ruth (see Genesis 38:8; Deuteronomy 25:5–10; commentary on Ruth 1:11 in Lesson 11). Since Ruth's husband (an Israelite) died without heirs, a male relative is expected to step in and produce a son to preserve the family line of the deceased.

B. Boaz's Prospects (vv. 10–12)

10. “The LORD bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor.

Boaz discerns Ruth's intentions rightly, blessing her instead of cursing her. On her actions as a *kindness*, see comments on this term at Ruth 1:8 in last week's lesson. He recalls Ruth's kindness to Naomi (1:8; 2:11) and declares the present action an even *greater* kindness. Ruth could have ventured on her own and charmed a younger man. But in keeping with her character thus far, she honors her mother-in-law's desires and, by extension, Israel's law.

Because of the legal complications and some other differences between the present situation and the scenarios envisioned in Genesis 38 and Deuteronomy 25, some scholars are disinclined to view Boaz's marriage to Ruth as a levirate marriage (see comments at Ruth 3:12 below). Their thoughts along these lines may be warranted. But even if not strictly of the law concerning levirate

marriage, Boaz's forthcoming marriage to Ruth certainly falls within the bounds of tradition, ethics, and cultural expectations of the day.

11. "And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character."

Just as Ruth has agreed to do all that Naomi instructed (Ruth 3:5), now Boaz agrees to do what Ruth seeks to be done. He recognizes both Ruth's risk in approaching him at night and her honorable intentions. His description of her as *a woman of noble character* uses the same two Hebrew words as found in Proverbs 12:4; 31:3, 10. Thus does Boaz assure Ruth that he will vouch for her reputation to *all the people of [his] town*.

12. "Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I."

Boaz accepts Ruth as his Israelite kin even though she is a Moabite by birth (see Ruth 2:20). He also acknowledges the issues of legality and social custom involved with Ruth's use of the term *guardian-redeemer*. Boaz's own integrity will not allow him to proceed until one hurdle is cleared. The duties of the guardian-redeemer must fall first to the nearest male relative, and there is someone *more closely related* to Elimelek than Boaz (see 4:1). Boaz must therefore defer to that man. Because land inheritance is also at stake, the nearest kin has right of first refusal. He must be given the opportunity to act as the kinsman or decline to do so.

III. At Home Again (RUTH 3:16–18)

A. Ruth's Account (vv. 16, 17)

16, 17. When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?"

Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.' "

In Ruth 3:13, 14 (not in today's text), Boaz pledges to redeem Ruth if the nearer kinsman cannot or will not do so. Ruth remains with Boaz until just before daybreak. Then she quietly takes her leave, carrying with her the *six measures of barley* that Boaz has given her. Exactly how much barley this is is uncertain. But the context makes apparent that it is a generous amount.

The gift serves at least two purposes: it confirms Boaz's intention to marry Ruth if he can, and it expresses his appreciation to Naomi. He does not want Ruth to return to Naomi *empty-handed*. The word being translated that way is the same one Naomi used to describe herself when she returned to Judah (Ruth 1:21). The implication is that Naomi's empty days are done. God thus works through Boaz on behalf of both women (see Psalm 37:3–5).

B. Naomi's Advice (v. 18)

18. Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

Naomi bids Ruth to *wait* and be patient, for the final resolution of the marriage possibility will not take long. Within a few hours she expects Boaz will have the matter resolved (see Ruth 4).

Conclusion

A. Good Models Are Hard to Find

Marriage is one of the most sacred covenants that human beings can enter into. Sadly, integrity in this hallowed relationship is all too rare. Some cite “irreconcilable differences” after growing apart for years. Others find, too late, that they were not well-suited to each other from the very beginning of their relationship.

Infidelity abounds in all segments of society. Spouses cheat through social media, visiting illicit websites, concealing text messages, hiding money, etc. Abuses of many kinds contribute to broken marriages.

Scripture does not downplay the lack of good role models, whether in the arena of marriage or elsewhere. The actions of biblical characters are not always noble or exemplary. Even the one described as “a man after [God’s] own heart”—David son of Jesse (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22)—failed miserably (2 Samuel 11). The account in today’s lesson, however, presents a shining example of integrity and determination to follow God’s principles.

There was no manipulation to obtain selfish goals. Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz acted as people of God in the best sense. What models they continue to be!

B. Prayer

Father, form in us an upright character that works to advance your purposes in the world. We pray for this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God blesses and uses those who show integrity in relationships.¹

¹ Cook, S., Lueders, B., Taylor, M. A., & Thatcher, T. (2018). [A Covenant to Marry](#). In R. L. Nickelson (Ed.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2018–2019* (Vol. 25, pp. 433–439). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.