

August 18, 2019

## Lesson 12: A Covenant to Marry

Scripture: Ruth 1:6-18; 3-4; Matt. 19:1-12

### Context:

Our lesson continues with the book of Ruth with a bit from the Gospel of Matthew. The purpose according to the curriculum is to recognize the risks and rewards that come with covenantal love. While the title says that the lesson is about a covenant to marry, it is actually more about vulnerability and how that plays a role in covenantal relationships.

In these chapters of the Ruth narrative, we read more about the travels of Naomi and Ruth. As we read the book, we are given a glimpse of how ancient Israelite society functioned and the roles that men and women were given.<sup>1</sup> The society was clearly patriarchal with women dependent on their male relatives, particular husbands and sons.<sup>2</sup> In this case, Naomi and Ruth are without either and they must now find the nearest male relative to help them in their plight.

As Naomi and Ruth go on to survive, there are two ancient practices in the text. The first is known as “levirate marriage.” A levirate marriage is a legal tradition found in both Genesis and Deuteronomy in which there is a “redeemer,” a kinsman whose responsibility it was to assume the position of male protector when the primary head of a household had died, especially with regard to property and blood vengeance.<sup>3</sup> This is where we meet Boaz, who is a kinsman of Naomi and Ruth. He is not the first in line, but he is definitely able to meet the requirement of being the “redeemer.”

The second practice we read about is the practice of gleaning. Gleaning was the practice of not completely harvesting a field and vineyard so that the residue could be left for the benefit of the marginalized in society – the poor, widows, orphans, and resident aliens.<sup>4</sup> Ruth and Naomi must glean in order to live.

Yet in the midst of it, they see that Boaz could make a good husband and provider. Even though there is a closer relative, he is the one they focus upon. Thus, Ruth dresses up and seeks to allure him into a relationship. Boaz responds and following tradition, goes to the town’s gate, the place of commerce and judicial proceedings, to find Ruth’s nearest relative.<sup>5</sup> The relative gives his permission for Ruth to have another “redeemer.”

The tale ends well for all parties. Boaz marries Ruth and the two women find a

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 229.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 229.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 229. See scriptures for more context: Gen. 38; Deut. 25: 5-10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 229. See scriptures for more context: Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19-22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 229. See scriptures for more context: Deut. 25:7; Job 29:7; Prov. 31:23.

home and support. We see how vulnerability led Boaz and Ruth to realize that they cared for each other and led them to make a lifelong covenant to one another. It is a good example of how covenant can come with both risks and rewards.

### **Application**

While today's lesson may read more like a trashy romance novel in which we see a woman go after a man, there is something deeper going on in the text. Both Ruth and Boaz are vulnerable with each other. Even in the midst of dressing in nice clothes and wearing perfume, we see Ruth trying to prepare for intimate relations by offering herself. For Boaz, we see him acknowledging his age and the position that Ruth finds herself in. Both reveal the importance of vulnerability in covenant.

When we think of marriage, we think of the words that are given in the exchanging of vows. In covenant, we think of the promises that are made in which all parties vow to fulfill their end of the promise even if the other does not. In both cases, there is vulnerability that comes in having intimate relationships. There is a pledge in which both parties make themselves open to each other and expose the deepest parts of themselves.

For a marriage covenant, and any covenant really, vulnerability is the only way that the relationship may thrive. One cannot be dishonest or manipulative in a relationship and expect it to last. It is only in honesty and being transparent that covenants can be fulfilled.

Of course this can be extremely scary and risky. How do you know that the other party will love you for you, or keep their promises? What happens if you share yourselves with them only to be betrayed or manipulated? Do you feel comfortable being completely vulnerable around them, allowing your insecurities and feelings to be fully known? These are all important questions to consider when being in any covenant.

The prayer is that like Ruth and other individuals, we can find those parties who understand covenant and the importance of vulnerability in a relationship. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen and people have their hearts broken. Some people struggle with vulnerability and transparency. This can lead to broken relationships and ineffective communication.

A good way to look at your own covenant if you are married is to think about if you can truly be yourself with your spouse. If you have to lie about your feelings or change yourself in order to be with them, then you have some things to figure out and reflect upon. If your partner is that way, it might be good to open yourself up about the challenges facing the marriage.

If you are not married, it is good to think about if you can be yourself while dating a person. If the person you are seeing cannot handle or respect your vulnerability, that is a sign that they may not be ready for marriage or that is not a relationship for you. Remember that marriage will not change a person if there are preexisting issues.

And for all of us in covenants of marriage, friendship, and the church, we are reminded that honesty and vulnerability are gifts. When we are vulnerable with people we trust and love, then we can share in a kindred nature that binds us together. This bond can help us in all seasons of life.

Vulnerability isn't just about insecurities or feelings, it's also about letting your guard down and enjoying being with others. It can be through silliness, playfulness, and

just naming those random things that float through your head. And when you share them, the other party responds and you are able to laugh and enjoy the secrets you share. Hopefully, you can find those people and to see both the wonderful risks and rewards that come with covenantal love.

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