

SEXUAL ATTRACTION AND MORAL CHOICES

by Steve Zeisler

It created quite a stir among observers of the local scene last week when it was announced that Chelsea Clinton would be attending college at Stanford next September. That announcement reminded me of years past when our children, on May 1 of their senior year in high school, cast their lot for the next year. For many, choosing a college is also choosing to leave home for the first time. Perhaps three or four options are available to a student, and the decision is often difficult. But eventually the day comes when a decision has to be made. A fork in the road is chosen and life veers off in a new direction.

Even more important is the day when a man and woman face the decision of whether or not to marry. Whatever choice is made at this fork in the road significantly influences everything that will follow.

A TIME FOR DECISION

That's the place we've come to in the story of Ruth and Boaz. We've come to a high point when this man and woman are going to make a decision about whether to be married to each other. There's no putting it off any longer. Some time has gone by, a relationship has developed, they have feelings for one another; and have thought about future possibilities. Now the night has come when the question of marriage will be raised. Ruth 3:1-2:

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? And now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight."

We discussed verse 1 as part of our study of chapter 2 (see [Discovery Paper 4583](#)). Naomi is re-entering the story with a point of view and advice to give. By now we ought to feel a bit hesitant about her statements. We've observed her advice, and world view enough to realize that though she respects God's power, she finds it difficult to have faith that he's going to provide for the widows in Elimelech's family. What we'll find as the story unfolds is that Naomi has one approach, and Ruth, looking at the same set of circumstances, chooses something different. Once again the two women will be distinguished from each other, and we will learn from their differences .

Naomi rightly assesses that it is time for the nature of Ruth's and Boaz' relationship to be clarified. Two harvests have taken place since Ruth and Boaz first met one another (2:23). Given the circumstances, it is time for a decision.

Further, it is right for Naomi to desire security for Ruth. Ruth is in a very precarious position. She is a foreigner, widowed, and poor. "Security" is an interesting word in Hebrew. Some translations say, "Shall I not provide a home for you?" The term has both ideas in mind—a place of rest, a secure home, a place of acceptance and protection. And because Naomi knows that Ruth is committed to taking care of her mother-in-law, she realizes that Ruth's advantages are going to be her advantages too—she's not foolish—and she wants a good outcome for both of them.

The problem is the means she chooses to achieve that end. Let's read her advice to Ruth in verses 3-18:

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. And 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." And she said to her, "All that you say I will do."

So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her. 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. And 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.

And 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."

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. And 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. And now it is true I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I. 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."

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." 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.

And 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. And she said, "These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said, 'Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'"

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."

There's no way to be sure about this, but sanctified imagination and trying to read the subtleties of the story suggest a couple of things about Boaz' and Ruth's relationship. They have been working together; Ruth has been gleaning, and Boaz has been overseeing the work of his harvesters. They have seen one another day after day, presumably. This has gone on for two months, and they have feelings for one another that are unmistakable.

But they each have a barrier blocking the way to a future together. Ruth feels unworthy of Boaz. She said so herself in chapter 2. She fell on her face when he first spoke to her and said, "Why would you notice me?" (v. 10). And later she said, "I'm not even worthy to work for you" (v. 13). The problem for Boaz is that he considers himself too old for her (3:10). In addition, Boaz is aware of another kinsman with a stronger claim (Naomi and Ruth may not know about him).

Yet Naomi is insightful enough to realize what's going on. She understands the feelings that they can't articulate very well. So she has decided that it's time for the two of them to discuss their relationship. And she sets events in motion.

Before we look at Naomi's specific advice, notice that chapter 2 and chapter 3 have the same structure. They both begin with a conversation between the two women. Then Ruth goes off to the place of work, either the field or the threshing floor. She and Boaz have a conversation, and she comes back with food. In both cases, Boaz doesn't recognize Ruth at first (2:5, 3:9). Then in his discovery of who she is, he finds out a great deal more than he expected each time.

But there are differences between these chapters too. In one case the couple is surrounded by others in broad daylight. In the other, they are alone at night. In chapter 3 the meeting is very deliberately set up, whereas in chapter 2 Ruth "happened" onto the field of Boaz.

MANIPULATION THROUGH SEXUAL ATTRACTION

Now let's consider the specific advice of Naomi. Everything she said had to do with Ruth's physical attractiveness and the timing of her physical nearness to Boaz. She picks harvest time, which in agricultural communities all over the world is a festive occasion. The party is thrown after winnowing, when the heaps of grain are on the threshing floor. She anticipates that Boaz will have something to drink (and the text later notes that his heart was merry--he was tipsy. Naomi's counsel is, "Wait until his wits are least about him. Look as good as you can. Wash yourself and anoint yourself [that is, put on an alluring fragrance]. Put on your most attractive clothing, and snuggle up to his feet at a time when he'll least expect it. Then wait and see what happens." Ruth was not directed to say anything, maybe just waft her scent in his direction, or hope he was captured in some other way by her presence. Naomi's advice is about beguiling the man, being alluring. Naomi doesn't intend for Ruth to seduce him on the threshing floor, and certainly Ruth would never agree to such a plan. But what she clearly does intend is that the evening will contain enough sexual tension so that Boaz will make a decision based on the power of romantic possibilities.

The problem is that you don't arrive at security and rest, which is what Naomi is setting out to do, by maneuvering people around their better judgment. You don't ultimately create a relationship that is going to have enough depth to be really honest by learning to maximize someone's inability to think clearly. Stealthy manipulation isn't the way to build security in a relationship. It doesn't work in any setting.

This is one of the reasons politicians are so vilified. At election time they make promises, but once voted into office, they renege. The voter was tricked into believing an illusion, and there is eventually a negative backlash.

Let me say a word about the power of sexuality in particular in this regard. A husband's or wife's sexual approach can be something spontaneous and joyful, a gift of tenderness, an offer of thanksgiving, a request for reassurance, an appeal to be held onto, or an expression of deeply understood oneness. But it shouldn't have any background questions. "What does she [he] want from me now?" should not be part of being invited into intimacy with one's partner. Love making as a means to an end undermines a marriage.

APPEALING TO THE BEST IN SOMEONE

Thankfully, the text tells us that Ruth was wise enough to do what she was told, but not for the reason that she is told. As Ruth prepared for the evening, bathing and applying fragrance and putting on her best clothes, her thoughts must have turned to questions about God's purposes and the evidence of Boaz's commitment to righteousness. Understanding the implications of what Naomi has instructed her to do, perhaps she said to herself, "Boaz is not the kind of man Naomi assumes him to be. How can I trust the Lord with the evening to come?"

At the critical moment, when Boaz awakened, Ruth didn't rub his feet or nibble his ear, or give him any other nonverbal signals that would make her presence more suggestive. With a fearful cracking voice she spoke to Boaz about a responsibility based on the teaching of scripture, "You should marry me, you're a near kinsman." The figure "spread your covering over your maid" is a statement about marriage. It does not describe the blanket under which they are lying. In other words, it means, "Put your cover over me as a husband." Even today Jews in many different settings get married under a canopy, which is the same notion that is translated "covering" here. In Ezekiel 16 when God draws near to Israel, his fallen young bride, and initiates a marriage relationship with her, the same language is used.

Ruth declares that Boaz should marry her because he has a responsibility from God as a kinsman. Elimelech is dead and Mahlon is dead, and there is property that will be lost, a family name that will never be known of again. It was the clear responsibility of the family members to protect the property and provide an heir. Ruth appeals to Boaz to do what is right before the Lord.

Consider, also, that the word translated "covering" in chapter 3 is the same word that is used in chapter 2 when Boaz says, "May you be blessed of the LORD. May your wages be full from the LORD, the God under whose wings [covering] you have come to seek refuge." The covering of the wings of God was

where she sought refuge, and now she is saying, "Will you put your wings over me? Will you be the means by which God covers me with his wings?"

Such a request fit Boaz exactly. After he said, "May your wages be full from the LORD" in chapter 2, he obtained food to give her. He asked God to bless her, and then became the instrument of blessing. Here he has the opportunity to become the agent of protection that she sought from the Lord. What Ruth is saying to him is, "There is a responsibility from the law on which you should act, and I call on you to do what you really want to do, to be God's servant."

A marriage relationship is going to provide security when husband and wife can speak as Ruth did to Boaz. A godly spouse will speak to you of the things of God, remind you of who you are, draw out the best in you, help you believe in yourself when you can't and strengthen you in the obedience your heart longs for. Real security and rest are not found in a relationship in which each partner is trying to maneuver and steer the other without honest speech.

In the end, what actually took place between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor had nothing to do with what Ruth wore, the quality of her fragrance, or Boaz' tipsiness. Not one of the things that Naomi mentions as being key factors came into play. Ruth spoke of his opportunity to be God's man. Boaz responded by blessing her: "May you be blessed of the Lord. Don't be afraid. God will act and I will act for you." What Boaz discovered through Ruth's courageous statement is that he was not, as he supposed, too old for her to be interested in him.

So the evening becomes one not of sexual tension leading to reckless decision-making, but an opportunity for two people to pray for each other, to speak of God to each other, to see boundaries come down.

TRUSTING GOD TO ACT IN THE LONG RUN

However, the decision to live by faith always entails risk. Because Ruth and Boaz were committed to biblical precepts they could not plan to marry unless the man with prior responsibility refused to be responsible. So they faced the possibility of losing everything they longed for by doing what was right.

Let's try to imagine what the rest of their night was like. Ruth lay at Boaz's feet until just before dawn, but we don't know if either of them slept. Did they whisper to one another, or pray to the Lord? Did they gaze at the stars and dream of the future? We don't know, but we do know that they spent the night very close to one another, unsure of whether they would ever be so close again.

The Christian life is mirrored in Ruth's experience. The book of Hebrews says that believing people are strangers in a strange land, sojourners in a foreign country. Like Ruth, we can take risks of faith trusting that God will be true to his word. Or we can be more like Naomi and attempt to find security by steering events and engineering outcomes for ourselves. I hope the example of how Ruth and Boaz were willing to speak of the Lord when they might have acted on their own will inspire us to similar discipleship.

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