

AVOIDING UPENDED LIVES

Ruth 3:1-5

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Happy New Year! Welcome to 2017. The new year is often a time for people to make various kinds of lists. The obvious one is a list of New Year's resolutions. Others are the updating of the popularized Bucket List, a project list, or a honey-do list. So in the spirit of the New Year's propensity for making lists, I am going to show you a list of items; see if you can tell me what they all have in common.

Asking for a raise

Trying out for a team

Running for a school office

Being open with others about your true feelings

Asking for time off so as to worship on Sunday

Applying for admission to a school

Becoming irrationally angry when a close friend withdraws slightly

Applying for a job

Asking for someone's hand in marriage

What do the items on this list have in common? Each involves the possibility of personal rejection, something to be feared! The fear of rejection is common for all of us, and unfortunately we each will have many opportunities to experience this throughout the new year. We will also feel a fear of the unknown, the fear of failure, and many other types of fear. Typically, a decision is needed when that emotion occurs. Decision making is never easy and almost always risky, because the results of that decision could turn out negatively or positively.

I truly hope that all our decisions will prove to bring about positive results in 2017, but what if they don't? How will you respond if you find they are negative?

Now is the time, not when the moment for decision arrives, but now is the time for us to set the direction of our course, should sudden dangerous storms

threaten our lives. I'm not suggesting that we have answers now to future problems we can't see. But what I am suggesting is that we should have a plan for how we will face challenging times that require risky decisions. If we don't think clearly about how we will respond to life's major disappointments, should they come, our lives can quickly become upended. Allow me to put it in the form of an observation: When upright people take a risk, a negative outcome can easily upend their lives. Marrying the wrong person, moving to the wrong town, losing or not getting a job because of a decision we made, or experiencing a worse health issue because we trusted in what turned out to be poor medical advice are all possible.

When we face major disappointments, new normals that we don't like, financial setbacks we never expected, or other negative outcomes, we may either turn toward the Lord or away from Him. Should an upended life cause us to believe that God has abandoned us, or should we question God's goodness in this fallen world? If we believe that God is sovereignly in control and is good and can allow negative outcomes for the purpose of bringing about a better good, then we can move through the valley of distress we may be facing.

This morning, we are going to look at someone who had already faced several hardships and negative outcomes, yet continued in her new faith to trust God. But now, she faced another challenge that demanded she take a risk that did not guarantee a positive outcome. In fact, the immediate result could be negative. It could mean rejection and humiliation. So the question arises, "How could she so bravely attempt such a risky venture without being gripped by the fear of failure and a negative outcome?" That's what we want to consider this morning as we return to our study of the book of **Ruth**.

If you are joining us in this study, let me bring you up to speed. Ruth is a short four-chapter book that can be easily understood as a four act play. In Act 1, **Chapter 1**, we have a crisis—famine. A family was forced to leave their home in search of food to survive. Ten to fifteen years later, when the famine was over, the family of four had been whittled down to one old widow, childless and destitute. She returned to her original home with another widowed daughter-in-law, an unwelcome foreigner for whom Naomi was responsible to provide and protect. But this widowed daughter-in-law, Ruth, was a gift to the older widowed Naomi, for Ruth had not returned to Naomi's

home to seek her own fortune, but rather to look after Naomi for the rest of her life.

Act 2, **Chapter 2**, reveals an opportunity for both women. It was harvest time, and the fields were available for the destitute to glean in and to push away the wolf of starvation from their door. **Chapter 2** takes place in a field.

Ruth had taken the initiative to see if she could find a field in which to glean grain for food for herself and Naomi. She happened upon a field in which she met a stranger, the owner of the field. This noble man was a man of character, a moral man, an influential man who served the one true God, Yahweh. Because he had heard of Ruth the Moabites and was impressed by the rumors that she was a woman of character, he showed her unexpected kindness, not because he was in love with her, but because he mercifully believed she deserved a break.

By the end of Act 2, at the end of a long work day, Ruth returned home tired but with much grain. When her mother-in-law, Naomi, saw the results of her labor and found out that the owner of the field was a close relative, Boaz, she quickly concluded that this kind man might be the answer to all of their problems.

That brings us to our study for this morning, Act 3, **Chapter 3**. This act, for the most part, takes place on a threshing/winnowing floor out in the field. However, this first scene actually opens in a small home where our destitute widows were living, facing an uncertain future. Several weeks, maybe three or four, have elapsed between the end of **chapter 2** and the beginning of **chapter 3**, barley winnowing time. The winnowing of grain normally happened after both the barley and the wheat had been cut, gathered, and allowed to dry for a few weeks at the threshing floor.

Because of the way the previous act ended, with Boaz being so generous to Ruth, one may speculate that Naomi hoped Boaz would take the initiative in establishing a relationship with Ruth. But as of yet, nothing had happened in that arena. For the previous three to four weeks, Ruth had faithfully worked hard at bringing home food to feed the two of them for the rest of the year.

I'm convinced that Naomi had grown impatient with Boaz's lack of reaching

out to Ruth. Perhaps Naomi thought that Boaz was being sensitive toward the recently widowed Ruth, not wishing to impose himself upon her until she was emotionally healed and ready to contemplate remarriage. So Naomi, in looking out for her daughter-in-law's future, took it upon herself to press the issue.

Follow along as I read.

¹Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? ²Now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were [meaning out in the fields gleaning barley and wheat for the previous weeks]? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight. ³Wash 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. ⁴It 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.”

⁵She [Ruth] said to her, “All that you say I will do.”

Naomi addressed the problem head on: she needed to find a husband for her daughter-in-law as she couldn't provide for or protect her. She gently and affectionately addressed Ruth as “**my daughter**.” This expression reveals how Naomi felt about Ruth. She loved Ruth and cared about what was in her long-term best interests, that is, her future “**security**.”

Once again, I find it interesting to see how translators wrestle to capture the meaning of the Hebrew used here. Some translations say “**rest**” and others “**home.**” The word for “**security**” speaks of the security and tranquility that a woman in Israel longed for and expected to find in the home of a loving husband to protect and provide for her. In short, Naomi was concerned for this young widowed daughter-in-law’s future. Ruth shouldn’t remain vulnerable, as Naomi presently was. She would need someone to look out for her, to provide and protect her during these evil days.

In **verse 2**, Naomi laid out the facts. Boaz was not simply a relative, but to the best of Naomi’s knowledge he might have been the nearest kinsman or relative they had. If so, Naomi believed he had the responsibility to fulfill the role of a Kinsman Redeemer.”

This idea of a kinsman or close relative who had some responsibility toward other family members first came up in **2:1**, again in **2:20**, and now a third time in **3:2**. What was so important about someone being a kinsman or a redeemer? The answer requires a little explanation.

If a member of a family found himself or herself in need, under Old Testament law, it was the responsibility of the Kinsman Redeemer to meet that need. According to Hebrew law, there were five responsibilities of the Kinsman Redeemer toward the members of his clan.

1. To ensure that the hereditary property of the clan never passes out of the clan. (**Leviticus 25:25-30**)

Property was to always remain with a family or clan. Whether a family moved from the property temporarily, or whether the owner died, by law that property was to remain a part of the inheritance for the next of kin. In Naomi’s case, her late husband Elimelech had rights to property that needed to be passed on to his own family’s next generation. When he died, it would be the responsibility of the Kinsman Redeemer to make sure that the property was returned to one of her living sons.

But what if there were no living sons to take over ownership of the property, as in Naomi and Ruth’s case? According to Hebrew law, a Kinsman Redeemer could marry Naomi or a daughter-in-law in order to provide for

them an heir to whom the rightful property, family name, and heritage would go. But then, that could bring about other legal issues for the Kinsman Redeemer. What if he were already married, and after he provided his second wife with a son, his then first wife, who may have been childless at that point, were suddenly to get pregnant and have a son? To whom does the original property of the Kinsman Redeemer belong? Can the son of the second wife lay claim to both sets of properties, his mother's and his father's? It gets sticky, and that is why some Kinsman Redeemers refused to take on the responsibility.

Or, if you were already happily married, why bring another woman into the picture if you didn't have to? Some men might think that is a great idea, but it really isn't. It only leads to jealousy and conflict among the wives and children. That's why only in this extreme case did God give permission for Levirate, or for a man to be married to two women at the same time.

If a Kinsman Redeemer chose to forego his responsibility to the widow, then the widow or her representative, in the presence of the town elders, would remove the sandal of the Kinsman Redeemer who refused to fulfill his responsibility and humiliate him publicly by spitting in his face.¹

Quickly, let's look at the four other responsibilities of a Kinsman Redeemer. He was:

2. To maintain the freedom of individuals within the clan by buying back those who have sold themselves into slavery because of poverty. (Leviticus 25:47-55)

3. To track down and execute murderers of near relatives. (Numbers 35:12, 19-27)

4. To receive restitution money on behalf of a deceased victim of a crime. (Numbers 5:8)

5. To ensure that justice is served in a lawsuit involving a relative. (Job 19:25; Psalm 119:154; Jeremiah 50:34)²

¹ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 675). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

I should note here that Middle Eastern culture was different from our own. From the perspective of females such as Naomi and Ruth, the priority was safety, provision, and protection. However, the highest priority of the Hebrew male was the family heritage, the family name, and the reputation of the family. That would necessitate having children.

In some Oriental families, of which Hebrews and Arabs are a part, their reputations wouldn't allow them to mix races in marriage. And as important as it was to maintain a family's heritage, surely a potential Kinsman Redeemer might not want his family line messed up with a Moabite, or a prostitute such as Rahab, in **Joshua**. So there was no guarantee that Boaz would accept the responsibility of a Kinsman Redeemer. In fact, there was a great possibility that he would reject Ruth.

Another important fact that we are given in **verse 2** is that this was the winnowing season, and that Boaz chose to do his winnowing at night. Barley was typically threshed at the onset of the dry season (late May through June). During that time of year, the winds can be too strong to winnow grain during the day time, blowing the grain away with the chaff.

Prior to my study of **Ruth**, I knew virtually nothing about how grain is processed from harvest to flour. I didn't know the difference between sifting, threshing, and winnowing. Just in case you don't either, it might help you to get a better insight to what is happening in our story. If you really want an education, just go on the internet, google threshing, and you will see several demonstrations.

Typically, grains like barley and wheat are not threshed right after they have been harvested. The stalks are wrapped in bundles and set aside to dry before threshing, because it makes for easier processing.

The fact that Ruth threshed her harvested barley grain immediately tells the informed reader that she and Naomi were desperately low on food when they arrived back in Bethlehem. It's why she took immediate measures to locate a field in which to glean. It also helps us understand why Boaz's gift of leftover roasted grain from lunch was so vitally appreciated by Ruth and Naomi. It meant that they could eat right away without having to wait weeks until their

grain was processed.

But typically, after the stalks have been allowed to dry, then the threshing begins. The best threshing floors involved rock outcrops on hilltops. The hard surface was needed to keep the grain free of dirt and to facilitate sweeping up the grains at the end of the day. The hilltop location was in or near the field where the harvest took place. It allowed them to take advantage of the strong winds that would blow away the chaff from the grain when the stocks of grain were tossed in the air with a fork. The heavier kernels of grain would fall to the floor.

After the initial threshing, the grain still needs more sifting. It needs several opportunities to separate the grain from bits and pieces of chaff and debris that cling to the heads of grain.

The final sifting is known as winnowing. Apparently, Boaz chose to do his winnowing at night, presumably because the gentle night breezes were more desirable than the gusty winds of the daytime.² The stronger winds could blow the lighter sifted grains away with the debris. Following this step, the grain would be placed in sacks and stored.

Having been a veteran of this process, Naomi knew by the activity in the town what was happening out in the field. Hence, she knew that when the winnowing process was taking place, the men would all be out in their fields, spending the night to protect the fruits of their labors from thieves and marauding animals. For sure, as the owner of the field, Boaz wouldn't think of sleeping at home at this point in the process.

So, in **verses 3-5**, Naomi set out the risky procedure for bringing to Boaz's attention that Ruth was available for remarriage. This text contains the sequence of bathing, applying perfume, and putting on clean garments in preparation for an encounter with a male. This procedure followed a potential bride's normal preparation for marriage.³

First, Ruth was to take a bath. Second, she was to apply or "**anoint**" herself

² Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 682). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

³ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 683). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

with perfume, which was made of a scented olive oil base. The need for perfume was heightened by the hot climate and the lack of modern style deodorants to combat body odors.

Third, Ruth was to put on her dress. The word used for “**dress**” refers to the outer garment that covered virtually the entire body except the head. In no case does the word require the meaning “best clothes” as rendered by the NIV and other translations. She did not mean for Ruth to dress up seductively or to put on the hot clothes of a prostitute. If this were Naomi’s intention, there are Hebrew words the writer could have chosen to clearly indicate this. But the term he uses here was the common word used to describe the garment that poor people used that could double for a blanket on a cold night. To think that Naomi was suggesting such a brazen act, to dress up seductively, would have repulsed rather than attracted a highly moral man as Boaz.⁴ Furthermore, there would be little point for dressing up, if she were going out in the dark. Who would see it?

One commentator I read suggested:

Naomi is hereby advising Ruth to end her period of mourning over her widowhood and get on with normal life. To take off her widow-in-mourning clothes and to dress obviously different would send the signal that she is available or ready to carry on with life, such as in becoming someone’s wife. . . . It may well be that until this time Ruth had always worn the garments of widowhood, even when she was working out in the field. Perhaps this was a reason for Boaz’s lack of pursuing Ruth at this time. As an upright man, he would not violate a woman’s right to grieve the loss of her husband nor impose himself upon her until she was

⁴ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 683). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

ready.⁵

Fourth, Naomi instructed Ruth to leave the protection of the walled town at night and stealthily go down to the threshing floor where Boaz was working

Next, Ruth, once she saw where he had lain down and when he had fallen asleep, was to uncover his “**lower limbs**” and lie down herself. Few texts in the book have generated as much discussion as this command. There is a line of interpretation that treats it as a command to engage in risqué and seductive behavior. I don’t agree. For her or Boaz to engage in such activity would stand in stark contrast to the moral character of both individuals as represented before and after this scene. To read such a motive into this scene tells me more about the reader than the subjects involved in the drama.

What Naomi instructed Ruth to do was, after Boaz fell asleep, uncover his legs, so that eventually, in the cold of the night, he would awaken and look around to see who would do such a thing. In addition, notice that Naomi did not instruct her to go and lie down next to Boaz or to even lie at his feet, as some translations and paraphrases suggest. She merely stated, “**and lie down.**” There is no descriptive preposition used in the Hebrew text.

In addition, if the risqué seductive interpretation were correct, how could a virtuous person like Boaz bless Ruth later in **verse 10** for her righteous action and in **verse 11** characterize her as a supremely noble or moral woman, if she were seeking sexual favors from him?

Furthermore, as I briefly noted early, typically neither Naomi nor Ruth seemed interested in sex or having children at this point.⁵ Naomi was driven throughout by her concern for long-range security for Ruth, for Ruth’s long term provision and protection, something Naomi would never be able to provide for her.

Finally, Ruth was to wait for further instructions from Boaz. The scene closes, leaving us to wonder if this delicate and dangerous plan would work.

No matter how it ended up, Ruth was taking a big risk of being misunderstood

⁵ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 686). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

and or rejected. How was it that she could afford to take this risk, and if all did not go well, possibly end up with an upended future? We are back to the original question of the morning.

Some might say, “Well, she had no choice. She was backed into a corner.” Maybe, but maybe not. She could continue to trust that God would provide in other ways. He had certainly proven Himself faithful so far.

Hence, I believe that Ruth had come to understand her new relationship with Yahweh. He leads, and when He does, it is not always easy to follow. But all along the way, He provided what she needed for the moment. For the previous six or seven weeks, she had witnessed God bring her to a strange land and provide for her and Naomi’s needs for the next year. God had certainly proven Himself trustworthy thus far. For her, there was more to life than being married and having children. Would she like that? I imagine so. But to have to have it to be content with the Lord? Not really.

Ruth was able to risk and not be upended in her life, if things didn’t turn out the way she had hoped, because she was a living example of this Scriptural promise: **“Trust in the Lord with all of your heart. Lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”** (Proverbs 3:5-6) Straight to where? Straight to the goal of what is best for you and what will bring Him the greatest glory. Sometimes that straight path will take us through rugged and dangerous and even painful terrain, but the Savior will always get us home safely. Just ask Mary and Joseph on the night when Jesus was born. She discovered that God lives in the midst of our hardship. God delivers in the midst of labor pains. God delivers through crucifixion and resurrection. Hardship is painful, but it is not a sign of His abandonment.

