

SURVIVING OR LIVING?

Ruth 3:6-18

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I was once told that when you make it through a crisis, it is not enough to simply survive, you need to keep living. That may be easier said than done!

The past few days, in fact three months, have been difficult for us as a church family. In almost thirty years of ministry, working in churches our size and larger, I have not been connected to so many heart-wrenching dramas in this short of a time. If you are a guest with us this morning or have only recently begun attending here, you might not know that we have had to say good bye to several who have been a part of this church family. It almost feels like an epidemic of which we are the survivors. Children, spouses, and longtime friends have all made that glorious transition to being with Jesus. In the meantime, we survivors grieve, but not as those who don't have any confidence that this is merely a temporary separation from those we love.

In addition to saying good bye to these dear ones, we have had more than our normal share of individuals end up in ICU units and rehab centers for extended care, which is stressful for all involved.

So, as a church family who has proven your love for one another, how are you doing? Are you surviving or just getting by? Are you living with purpose and direction, even though you may still be traveling through the valley of distress and have yet to come out the other side?

All these events make evident the need for seeing and experiencing God's mercy, His presence, His gentleness, and His favor. For without experiencing His hand in all that is happening around us, all we can say we are doing, day in and day out, is surviving and not living.

As a church family, we have had a measurable evidence of God's showing us His mercy, especially through the ways that He has used the kindnesses of others toward us to reflect His goodness in the midst of it all. As a result, this season of unusual loss has also been a period of experiencing God's "hesed,"

His loyal and devoted love caressing those who need it.

For instance, who would have guessed that during this same period of time, God would providentially have us to be testing out Victor's doctoral prayer project of "Everybody Everyday." This systematic prayer for everyone who attends this church every day has resulted in answers to our prayers and has drawn us closer to Him, strengthening our ties with one another.

Along with this, God several months ago providentially brought us to our study of the short book of **Ruth**, which highlights God's providence and His working behind the scenes to produce greater miracles amidst painful and stressful times. This book is so full of new lessons and old reminders for us all of how to live, not just survive, during challenging times. All of this God providentially initiated before our season of crisis began.

This morning as we return to the true story of Ruth found in **chapter 3**, we come to what is probably the most intense scene of the entire drama, beginning at **verse 6**. As we correctly understand the culture and nuances of the drama taking place, we can literally feel our stomach tie up in emotional knots, the same way we might feel when watching a powerful modern five-star drama. The pathos is so thick, you could cut it with a knife.

In the first scene, the older widow Naomi has given the younger widow Ruth instructions on how to properly inform a man that she is finished mourning the death of her husband and is ready to be considered for marriage, if he would be interested.

Having received clear directions from her mother-in-law, Ruth stepped out in faith to implement Naomi's instructions. Willing to risk rejection, Ruth left the safety of her home at night and stealthily headed down to the threshing floor in the field outside the town of Bethlehem. As she drew close to the threshing floor, she couldn't help but recognize the joyful atmosphere there. The intense work of winnowing barley and wheat, the hardest part of the job of grain production, was finished! All that was left to do was transport the grain to market. Now was the time to relax a little, to eat a celebrative meal, topped off most likely with wine, a Biblical symbolic drink often representing joy, being the beverage of choice at weddings and annual feasts and other celebrations.

We read:

⁶So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her. ⁷When Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain.

With these words, the writer of **Ruth** paints an image of a contented man at peace within himself, one who was in harmonious step with a world that yielded its fruit because of Yahweh's blessing on his hard work. The expression "**his heart was merry**" is an idiom that describes a sense of euphoria and well-being. No doubt Boaz was satisfied with the work that had been accomplished, but he probably was also feeling the effects of the wine. But unlike Lot in **Genesis 19**, there was no reason to interpret Boaz's condition as being one of a drunken stupor.¹

Notice that Boaz was not sleeping indoors or in a tent. The heap of grain was customarily left out in the open air. At this point in the harvesting cycle, the pile of grain would have been at the edge of the winnowing floor, waiting to be transported into the city. So Boaz moved over to sleep up against his grain and protect it from thieves and marauding animals. After she saw Boaz leave the supper and lie down, Ruth waited for him and others to fall asleep, so that she could secretively make her move. How much time elapsed between this point and Ruth's next action is not clear. We read, "**And she came secretly and uncovered his feet and lay down.**"

Because the late spring evenings were typically warm, Boaz was oblivious to her immediate exposing of his legs. But around midnight, when the temperatures dropped dramatically, he must have become aware. "**⁸It happened in the middle of the night that the man was startled and bent forward; and behold a woman was lying at his feet.**"

¹ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 689). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

The Hebrew word for “**startled**” could also be translated “**shivered.**” Then shivering, he bent forward and groped for his covers. “**Behold**” is a term of shock. Boaz was surprised to find someone lying by or near his legs; and he reacted, “⁹**Who are you?**” Remember, it was dark, and she had covered herself with her own cloak and might have been asleep. He knew by the shape that it was not a man, but he couldn’t see who she was and thus had no idea who would be lying near him.

At this point in the drama, Ruth, who was probably awake and waiting for Boaz to wake, spoke up quickly and made a bold request. “**And she answered, ‘I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative.’**”

What was Ruth doing or saying by asking Boaz to throw his cloak over her? I believe that Ruth was making two simultaneous requests of Boaz in this one demand. And grammatically, make no mistake, Ruth’s words were a very strong request, equivalent to a demand. But to see the two simultaneous requests, one must understand how the literal Hebrew translates here. The Hebrew words for “**spread your covering over**” translate “**spread your wing over.**” So for the first understanding of Ruth’s request, look with me back at **2:11-12.**

In this earlier scene, the day that Ruth first met Boaz several weeks prior to our present passage, Ruth was overcome by the unsought-after favor of Boaz. Remember, she was a foreigner, a Moabite stranger whom Boaz had never met, but he suddenly bestowed great privileges upon her, permitting her to freely glean from his fields as though she were a member of his household.

Overcome by his graciousness, she asked him, “**Why are you doing this for me.**” Remember his answer?

¹¹**Boaz replied to her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth and came to a people that you did not previously know. ¹²May**

**the LORD reward your work and your wages be full from the LORD,
the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.”**

Boaz not only explained why he had provided for her, but also blessed her with the analogy of, “May you find shelter, provision, and protection underneath Yahweh’s wings.”

Based on Boaz’s previous analogy in the blessing of “wings of protection,” Ruth was hereby demanding that Boaz take her under his wing and assume what she believed to be his responsibility for her security, as Yahweh’s Kinsman Redeemer. In effect, the words that Ruth used were the same as those expected from a man who wanted to declare, “I accept your proposal of marriage, for indeed I am your Kinsman Redeemer.”

With this carefully worded demand, Ruth was also making a second request. Again, the term for “**wing**” is also used to describe the corners of a blanket or a long flowing robe. That is why so many Bible translations have “**covering**” here, instead of “**wing**.” Consequently, Ruth’s request could also be understood in the sense that she was cold and wanted him to cover her and protect her from the chill of the night, for Boaz was not the only one who was shivering!

What Ruth was asking for here is absolutely extraordinary. Naomi had ended her instructions to Ruth by telling her to do whatever Boaz would say she should do when he awoke. But here, Ruth strayed from Naomi’s instructions. She did not wait for Boaz to give her instructions. Rather, she seized the initiative and made a demand of Boaz! The response of the first Hebrew readers to Ruth’s unusual boldness would be one of standing back with their hands over their mouths in shock at the hutzpah of this woman, wondering, “What in the world possessed Ruth to do such a daring thing!” Ruth was, in fact:

- A servant demanding that the boss marry her
- A Moabite demanding something of an Israelite
- A woman demanding something of a man
- A poor person demanding something of a rich person

“I mean, you have got to be kidding!” A person in Ruth’s position would never have done such a thing without risking serious blowback. This, along with knowing that Ruth had gone beyond Naomi’s instruction adds an immediate heightened tension to this scene. It is climactic. The expectation from such a brash act was doom. Nothing good could come from such a bold approach. Or, could it?

So the reader held his breath to see what Boaz would do. There were three possible responses that he could have had at that moment. The first requires that we keep in mind the morally dark times of the period in Israel’s history known as the Judges. The average Israelite male living in this highly immoral period might have welcomed the night visit of a woman, interpreting her presence as an offer of sexual favors, but not Boaz. Boaz’s righteous character as displayed in **chapter 2** and later in **chapter 4** defies that probability. Being a man of integrity whose track record had proven him to be one who looked out for the needs of others, he would not be one to take advantage of this widow in need.

The second possible response could be that Boaz would wake up, interpret Ruth’s actions as those of a noble and genuinely virtuous Moabite, and yet shoo her off as someone with whom he would have nothing to do because she was beneath him socially, racially, and economically. He might genuinely have helped this Moabite woman because she was a coat-string relative, but commit to marrying a Moabite? Not on your life.

The third possible response is the most improbable and most unexpected, but Boaz did wake up and recognize immediately the true meaning of Ruth’s actions and respond favorably to her.

But before we go there, notice as we get through these next verses that the text does not indicate that Boaz actually covered Ruth with his cloak. And I believe there is a reason for that. As much as he would like to seal the deal and marry her, he couldn’t make that commitment at that time. He couldn’t, because he knew that he was not the closest relative; he was not the Kinsman Redeemer who could legally accept such a proposal. But, as we will see, Boaz was very much interested in her proposal and wanted her to know that and not be discouraged that he could not fulfill her request. In order to not discourage her, he spoke tenderly to her. He began his tender response with a

blessing in **verse 10**. **“Then he said, ‘May you be blessed of the LORD, my daughter.’”** Boaz’s opening words are extremely important, for they break the tension in the drama. Now we, the readers, can relax, knowing that Ruth’s extraordinary and very forward proposition has received a sympathetic response.

“Then, after blessing her, he praised her saying, ‘You have shown your last kindness to be better than the first by not going after young men [choice men, virile men²], whether poor or rich.’” Boaz praised Ruth for her remarkable demonstration of **“kindness,”** which once again is that Hebrew word **“hesed,”** referring to a deep form of loyalty and devotion.

Ruth’s first act of **“kindness”** to which Boaz referred was what she did before they ever met for the first time in his field. That first act of kindness would be her radical abandonment of her own past, leaving her home in order to cast her lot with Naomi, Naomi’s people, and Naomi’s God, so as to spend the rest of her life devotedly loving on, providing for, and protecting her mother-in-law. Boaz actually used the Hebrew term **hesed** to describe her actions.

But her second act of **hesed** was her reaching out to this older man Boaz to be her security rather than a younger and more virile man. That, to Boaz, surpassed her prior kindness to Naomi. Boaz, by the way, was obviously not a withered old man. He was older than Ruth, but was still quite able to put in a full day’s work in the fields alongside his younger workers and then stay at the threshing floor all night.

Boaz continued with his reassuring words, **“¹¹Now, 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.”** Boaz responded with **hesed**, as he personally experienced her act of **hesed** toward him. Boaz could not have said these things to Ruth if he had believed her actions to be that of a brazen woman. By now, Ruth’s heart must have skipped more than one beat as she listened to Boaz’s warm response to her overtures.

But his next words signaled a possible disturbing development. Boaz went on to explain a little hindrance that prevented both of them from being able to fulfill their wishes right then. He said, **“¹²Now it is true I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I.”** At those words, her

heart must have suddenly stopped beating. Forced by his own integrity, Boaz explained they could go no further in their relationship that night.

Quickly, Boaz followed up with some immediate counsel to pacify Ruth's fears. He said, "¹³**Remain this night, and when morning comes, if he [the closest relative, the Kinsman Redeemer] 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.**" Right there, Boaz made her a promise. He told her what his plans were to try to make what they both wanted a reality. Boaz's determination to redeem Ruth if she became available to him is expressed even more emphatically by the oath at the end, "**as the LORD lives.**"² Further, his eagerness to redeem Ruth is also revealed in his four-time repetition of "**redeem you,**" emphasizing that she is the prized object of redemption. He pledged his commitment to be her provider and protector, if he could gain legal rights to be her Kinsman Redeemer.

His final words of counsel were, "**Lie down until morning.**" The specific Hebrew words used here remove any doubt that he is inviting her to join him under his cloak. There are specific terms the writer could have used if he meant that, but he didn't choose those words. Hence, his final counsel is equivalent to someone today saying, "Get some sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow."

¹⁴So 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." ¹⁵Again, 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.

Boaz obviously did not encourage this young woman to go back home in the dark, in the middle of the night, for that would have been too dangerous for a single woman with the lecherous two-legged wolves that were prowling about

² Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 696). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

during those days. But early in the morning, even when it was still dark, it would be safer for her to travel, because those evil men would have been long asleep by then.

In order to preserve her reputation (note Boaz's concern expressed in **verse 11**) she would need to be gone before anyone could recognize her.

The last line in the NASB, based on more recent scholarship, should probably read as the NIV has it, "**Then he went back to town.**" Saying that Boaz went to town, when normally he would have stayed in the field until his grain had been shipped out, highlights his urgency to get the Kinsman Redeemer problem resolved.

This Act closes with the final scene in **verses 16-18**, with Ruth returning home the same way she left, in faith. We read:

¹⁶When she came to her mother-in-law, she [Naomi] said, "How did it go, my daughter?" And she [Ruth] told her all that the man had done for her. ¹⁷She said, "These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said, 'Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed'" ¹⁸The she [Naomi] said, "Wait, my daughter, until you know how the matter turns out; for the man will not rest until he has settled it today."

If we stand back and look at this chapter as a whole, we can see that the writer lays out the chapter by bookending it with Naomi's instructions to Ruth. It begins with Naomi's instruction and ends with it also. For the most part, the middle section is Boaz's response, which includes sending home grain to Naomi. In packaging the events in this manner, the writer is subtly telling us that Naomi had read Boaz correctly. This gentleman Boaz had not approached Ruth, although he was majorly impressed by her character and liked her, because he dared not push or make his personal desires known to this recent

widow if she were not ready to be married. And Boaz was no fool; he knew who was behind this scheme, Naomi. And this gift of grain was an expression of his appreciation for Naomi's taking the initiative to get things moving. It was a sign of his good faith that he would do everything in his power to be Ruth's Kinsman Redeemer.

At this point, keep in mind that none of the key players knew how this story would end. None had received a special message from God that all would turn out well. In real time, they were waiting and wondering about her uncertain future.

Like some of you, you don't know if that romance will turn into the committed relationship you have hoped for all your life. You don't know if your health issue or the health concern of someone you love will turn out fine. Or, to put it another way, Ruth didn't know if her 401k would be there for her when she needed it. Or, Boaz doesn't know for sure that his pile of dried grain wouldn't suddenly catch on fire and burn up, while he was out doing the Lord's business. In short, there are no guarantees in life.

So, let us consider our original question: What does it take for a Christian to live, not just survive, through uncertain times? For one thing, it requires that you really know God, His character, what he is like. God is good, and He tells us that in this fallen world filled with various kinds of disasters, disease, and death, He sometimes allows difficult times for the purpose of a better good. Sometimes, we can't make sense of it. But that doesn't really matter if you truly know that God is good, He knows everything, and He is using even tragedies for your and His good purposes.

Psalm 46:10 was written to those who were scared to death because they were facing certain death. In it, the believer is instructed to "**Be still** [or cease striving] **and know that I am God.**" The implication is, "Trust me; even when you can't figure it out, I've got things under control. I'm working behind the scenes for your best." There is no better real life example of God's working behind the scenes in the midst of terrible circumstance to instruct us that He is in control than the book of **Ruth**. There is no better book to remind us that God has the long view in mind when he allows present day afflictions. Go back to **Ruth** and walk in her and Naomi's shoes.

Secondly, to do more than survive, and to live when you have had your heart broken due to injustice or loss, look in God's Word for his reminders and promises. When you come across them, take 3x5 cards, write out those verses, and put them places to remind yourself of His promises. Put them at the kitchen sink, on the mirror in your bathroom, on the dash board of your car, or next to your phone at the office so that you can read and read them again when you start to lost hope.

Let me close with an example of such a verse. Here is **Jeremiah 29:11-13** in the NASB translation:

¹¹For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.

¹²Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.

Or, maybe you would like it in a looser paraphrase, such as it is found in the *Message*.

¹¹I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for. ¹²When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. ¹³When you come looking for me, you'll find me.

Copy this verse and put it where you will see it often. When you find new verses as you are reading your Bible, replace the old ones. If you are looking for new verses or ones to begin with, ask someone, "What verses bring you comfort?" Ask me or my fellow elders.

