

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Choice: Ruth 3 - Choosing a Spouse

Consider this plot for a Hollywood romance...

A beautiful woman is widowed at an early age. She selflessly travels to a foreign land to care for her mother-in-law. In that land, she meets an older, but wealthy landowner, who lives a lonely, single life. Slowly, this landowner falls for the young woman and, against all the odds, love triumphs over racial and social prejudice. They both live happily ever after.

Or perhaps you prefer your films to be more down to earth and cynical. Try this...

A poverty stricken young widow and her equally broke mother-in-law, yearn for a better life. The older woman realises they have a relative who is a wealthy, single farmer. Together they plot and scheme to entrap him into marrying the young widow. The poor man has no chance, and is soon ensnared! He ends up having to support a wife, a son and a second hand mother-in-law!

If a team of Hollywood writers were let loose on the Bible story of Ruth they could easily come up with either of these caricatures. I will try and avoid these kinds of distortions as we consider the third chapter of Ruth, and see what it can teach us about choosing, and keeping, a spouse.

We will consider our topic under four major headings:

- **Criteria,**
- **Cosmetics,**
- **Compatibility,**
- **Considerate Care**

But first let's briefly remind ourselves of the background...

Ruth had been married already. She had married Mahlon in her home country of Moab, and had lived with his brother Chilion, Chilion's wife Orpah and the widowed Naomi, who was the mother of the two brothers. Mahlon had died, and when Naomi had announced that she was returning to the family home in Israel, Ruth had firmly decided to travel with her mother-in-law, even though Naomi made it quite plain that Ruth would almost certainly have to remain a widow for the rest of her life (Ruth 1:11-13). Ruth was quite ready to put her loyalty to Naomi, and more importantly her love of the God of Israel, ahead of her chances of remarriage. In a time when single women were very vulnerable, this was a bold decision. Naomi was very pleased with the way that her daughter-in-law worked hard to feed them both, but now she thought it was time to find Ruth a new husband.

Criteria

Perhaps, as a young girl, Ruth had built up a list that set out her criteria for an ideal husband. It might have gone like this...

- Strong and rugged, to make a good living and protect me
- Kind and gentle, so that I feel loved and appreciated
- Handsome
- Fun loving and cheerful.

The young Boaz might have done something similar. Perhaps, when he thought about the wife he would search for when he grew up, he wrote a list that read...

- Beautiful
- Hard working and ready to help around the farm
- Intelligent and good company
- Careful with money and a good manager of the home.

Whatever they thought as children, by the time we read about them in the book of Ruth they both had one clear criterion that came before any others. Their spouse had to be a follower of the God of Israel. Although we often picture Ruth as a beautiful young woman, the Bible actually says nothing about her physical appearance. What attracted Boaz to Ruth was her care for Naomi, and the fact that this was evidence of Ruth's faith in God. We can see this in chapter 2:10b-12, which says, "Why have I found favour in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?' And Boaz answered and said to [Ruth], 'It has been fully reported to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law... The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge'. It was essential for a Jew to marry within the nation of Israel. So Ruth, as a Moabitess, might have seemed to be a totally unsuitable match. Boaz, however, saw that it was not Ruth's racial status, but her commitment to the God of Israel that was vital. In Jewish law, Ruth had an obligation to marry a relative of Mahlon's and raise children to continue his family line. I have no doubt that she took this responsibility seriously, but she also wanted a husband who shared her trust in God. Faith in God was not the only criterion that each of them had, we will look at others in a moment, but it was the **first** one, and it was not negotiable. If we are looking for a spouse, this must be our first criterion, and we must not compromise on it. The New Testament makes it quite clear that Christians must marry other Christians. "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers." 2 Corinthians 6:14. "She is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." 1 Corinthians 7:39.

Just because we must seek a spouse who is a believer, it does not follow that we should marry the first Christian of the opposite sex that we meet! Other criteria need to be considered.

Caring Provision

In Ruth 3:1 Naomi says to Ruth, "My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you?" Naomi recognised that Ruth needed a safe home where she could be protected and cared for. It might not fit in with the script for a Hollywood romance, but the simple fact was that Ruth was in real poverty and needed somebody to provide for her. The Bible makes it plain that a husband has the responsibility to provide a safe environment for his wife and family. This is not a coded way to tell ladies to look for a rich, Christian husband! Most people in the west have shelter, food and physical security. What I mean is that we need a spouse who will build with us a home where both parties can feel safe and loved.

Shared Goals

Of course safety is not an end in itself. Maybe you feel God's call to serve Him by taking the Gospel into the inner city, or to a foreign country, whose government is hostile to Christianity. Sometimes God calls such people to stay single in order to serve Him most effectively in such circumstances. 1 Corinthians 7:25-35 deals with this topic. However, singleness is not mandatory and, in many circumstances, a married couple can serve more effectively. This may mean that the home is not very safe in the conventional sense. It is essential that we seek a spouse who shares our chief goals in life. There would have been no point in Boaz marrying Ruth if he did not want to have children! Nor would Ruth have been wise to marry Boaz if she hated farms and wanted to live in a big city! Like all good couples, Ruth and Boaz had shared goals.

Maturity

I'm not using maturity as a polite way to refer to age! I will talk about age differences in a few minutes, but by maturity I mean, how 'grown up' a person is in attitude. Boaz was significantly older than Ruth, and would certainly have known more about the religious practices and history of Israel than the recently arrived Moabitess. However Ruth had grown up quickly, due to her hard life, and was also an enthusiastic learner in the service of God. In short, there may have been differences in what we might call spiritual maturity between Boaz and Ruth, but they were both heading along the same path. It is not unusual, or unsuitable, for one partner in a Christian marriage to be more mature than the other, but there does need to be a real desire for, and evidence of, growth in the less mature person. There should also be a commitment to carry on encouraging and helping each other to grow after marriage.

Practical Constraints

There were some special, practical considerations in Ruth's case. She had to marry a close relative of Mahlon's, and she needed a husband who could provide for her financially. There might be many practical constraints on whom a particular believer might marry. You might know that you are unable to have children, and need a spouse who can accept that, or you may just need somebody who shares your passion for physically demanding sports. There is

nothing unbiblical, or unspiritual, about choosing a spouse within these constraints. It is far wiser to recognise these constraints before any relationship has begun.

Attraction

Attraction takes many forms. It can be physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. Western society places a huge emphasis on physical attraction. Physical attraction can be very short lived. No doubt this is why so many marriages are short lived today. Unless you are uncommonly dispassionate, you are unlikely to marry somebody for whom you feel no attraction at all! However, attraction can grow as well as fade away. I have no doubt that Boaz's attraction for Ruth grew as he first heard of her character from his workmen (chapter 2:6-7), then saw it himself (chapter 2:8-17) and then saw Ruth on a more regular basis as she gleaned in his fields each day for many weeks (chapter 2:21). My wife would tell you that I almost failed to notice her existence for a whole year after I met her! She, however, decided that I was suitable material for marriage the first day we met! So attraction can be immediate, or slow to develop. Neither is more correct, but an attraction that has elements that are mental, emotional and spiritual will be much more durable than a purely physical attraction.

Cosmetics

I don't intend to establish a theology of make up! What I mean by cosmetics is outward appearance, and, more particularly, the care we take for our outward appearance. In chapter 3:3 Naomi instructs Ruth, "Therefore wash yourself and anoint yourself, put on your best garment and go down to the threshing floor". Ruth had been working all day in the fields and was hot, grubby and dusty. Naomi advises her to clean up, and dress smartly before approaching Boaz. We live in a world that is obsessed by outward appearance. People have moved on from using beauty products, to having surgery to enhance their looks, and clothing is often openly, sexually provocative. We have to stand out against these trends, but we do not need to run to extremes in the other direction. Quite bluntly, I know some young men who would like to be married, who need to follow Naomi's advice about washing, anointing and dressing! After marriage as well, we need to remember that there are times when our outward appearance requires attention, and respect and love for our spouse should be reflected in the cosmetic. It is worth dwelling just a bit longer on the first five verses of chapter 3. Naomi is clearly free to give Ruth plenty of advice, almost to the point of instruction. At the end of Naomi's directions Ruth says, in verse 5, "All that you say to me I will do". Ruth is happy to be guided by the older woman. I am not advocating a return to arranged marriages! But we can learn from the open relationship between these two women, and the readiness to give and receive advice on important issues. There is a danger that we are so influenced by a culture of determined individualism, and the romantic ideal that we must 'follow our own heart', that we cut ourselves off from the wisdom and counsel of those with more experience and spiritual insight than ourselves. I would worry greatly about somebody who was talked into marrying against their own wishes. But I would worry just as much about somebody who pressed ahead with a relationship, despite the advice and warnings of all their family and friends. There are similar issues after marriage. Some parents need to be reminded that Genesis 2:24 says, "... a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife"! Parents should not try to run their children's lives after they are married. On the other hand, Naomi was still actively involved in Ruth and Boaz's life after the wedding – "Then Naomi took [Ruth's] child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him" Ruth 4:16. Wise counsel and practical support should always be sought and valued.

Compatibility

Are we compatible? How many couples have asked that question, and how many magazine articles have been written, giving a list of questions that you must answer to see if person 'X' is your 'soul mate'? How compatible were Ruth and Boaz? Ruth was from Moab and Boaz was from Israel. Boaz was still unmarried and Ruth was a widow. Ruth was poverty stricken and Boaz was "a man of great wealth". Ruth was a fairly young woman and Boaz was significantly older. He repeatedly refers to Ruth as 'daughter', and commends her for not pursuing young men (see Ruth 3:10-11). Clearly a successful marriage does not require both parties to be alike in every way. Spouses are not meant to be identical but complementary. My dictionary defines complement as meaning, 'add to in a way that enhances or improves'. That is a good way of expressing what a spouse ought to be. I think Boaz brought a certain steadiness and organisation to the marriage, and Ruth brought energy and liveliness. My wife is spontaneous and enthusiastic. If she has a good idea, she will pursue it vigorously. I am likely to want to think about it carefully and weigh up the alternatives. My wife is also very social and outgoing. I am more quiet and self contained. Thus we complement each other, as each brings something different to the marriage. If both spouses are spontaneous and enthusiastic about everything, life may be exciting, but it is also more likely to lurch into disaster due to a lack of forethought. At the other extreme, if one spouse loves to be out socialising every evening, and the other refuses to leave the house, then they are headed for trouble. Ruth and Boaz were different in ways that complemented each other. No doubt they worked on accommodating their differences before and after their marriage.

Considerate Care

What I want to highlight under this title is the way that Ruth and Boaz both focussed on satisfying other people, rather than on **being** satisfied themselves. Many marriages break down because people approach marriage with the intention of having their own needs met. Of course, in one sense, Ruth did just that! She needed a husband to provide protection and shelter, and to have and raise children. Perhaps she had a need to feel loved and cherished as well. I have no doubt that marriage to Boaz met all those needs, and more besides. However, I also have no doubt that Ruth devoted her energies to meeting Boaz's needs, not to making sure her needs were met. The history of her relationship with Naomi is that of putting somebody else first. She accompanied the older woman at the cost of leaving her own country and family forever, saying: "...your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried" (1:16-17). She worked the entire day under a hot sun, stooping to pick up fragments of grain, and then gave generously to Naomi (2:18). She had a reputation throughout all of Bethlehem for the care she took of Naomi. Boaz says of her, "... all the people of my town know that you are a virtuous woman" 3:11. Eventually the older women speak to Naomi about Ruth, speaking of her as, "... your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons". Lofty praise indeed, in a culture that valued sons so highly! Ruth brought this attitude to her marriage, and I am confident that it made for a very happy home. Boaz also focussed outside himself. His greeting to his workmen demonstrates his character. He addresses them with, "'The LORD be with you!' And they answered him 'The LORD bless you!'", 2:4. Boaz was pleased to be able to give to Ruth many of the things that she required, ranging from grain, to protection and then to marriage! The very fact that both of them approached marriage with a view to giving things to the other person, resulted in them receiving blessing themselves. If we look for a spouse who can supply a series of needs that we have identified in ourselves then, if we do not find those needs met after marriage, we will develop a sense of frustration and bitterness that will tear the marriage apart. Marriages function healthily when each spouse focuses, from the beginning, on giving to the other person, and derives joy and satisfaction from pleasing the other.

Some giving and receiving must only take place within marriage. There may well have been strong sexual temptation for Boaz when, "At midnight [he] was startled, and turned himself; and there, a woman was lying at his feet", 3:8. Boaz and Ruth were careful to maintain purity and their good reputation. Christians should follow their example today. Sadly, many people today put sexual intimacy before the wedding and postpone learning to give themselves in other ways until after the wedding. This reverses the order found in the Bible, and we should not be surprised when it ends in disaster.

Ruth and Boaz had both learned as individuals to love and trust God. This enabled them to learn to love and trust each other, deeply and effectively. In chapter 2:12, Boaz uses a lovely picture to describe Ruth's trust in God when he says, "under whose wings you have come for refuge". Ruth strikes a beautiful echo of that, when she says in chapter 3:9, "I am Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing". Whether you are seeking a spouse, or seeking to live happily with the spouse that God has already given you, may you learn from Boaz and Ruth, the art of giving yourself to another in ways that help them, satisfy you and glorify the God under whose wings **you** have come to trust.

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