

# A Plan for Protection

## Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

<sup>1</sup> Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. <sup>2</sup> Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. <sup>3</sup> Now wash 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. <sup>4</sup> When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." <sup>5</sup> She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do."...

<sup>13</sup> So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. <sup>14</sup> Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! <sup>15</sup> He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." <sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. <sup>17</sup> The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Hello, my name is Ruth and I would like to share my story.

I was born in the land of Moab, to two loving parents. However, when I was young my father died, leaving my mother a widow. Other than being fatherless I had what I believe was a normal childhood. We worshipped Chemosh, the "fish god" whose name means "destroyer," or "subdue." As a child I always wondered if the destroyer god would ask the priest to sacrifice me for the sins of my parents, my family, my clan or my county.

When I was a teenager, I met a young man named Mahlon. He was very kind but came from a different nation and culture. Although I was reluctant to marry a foreigner, the day came when I said yes! I learned that his deceased father Elimelech, and his mother Naomi, had immigrated to Moab from Israel. There had been a famine in their land and they had come to make a life in my county. They stayed because his father died.

I learned so much from Mahlon and my dear mother-in-law. Many of the things they taught were different from what I learned as a child. I learned the “family unit” is the central aspect of Israelite culture. We are part of the ancestral house of Israel, son of Isaac, son of Abraham the Hebrew, our people. We are also a part of the family of Judah, son of Israel, that is our tribe. We are part of the family of Perez, our clan. Our identity is the household of Elimelech of Bethlehem. When married, women move to their husband’s household and basically give up their old family identity.

I also learned all humans, males and females, are made in the image of God and deserve dignity and respect. They said their people had been slaves in Egypt and they were not allowed to treat any fellow human, even if they were widow, orphan or stranger, with disrespect. They said they were to provide for widows and orphans, not because the king commanded it, but that their God commanded it.

Caring for the disadvantaged, especially those without male or financial support, is written into the law of the country. Israel is instructed to offer the third year’s produce, given specifically so that “the immigrants, orphans, and widows who live in *our* cities, will come and feast until they are full. Do this so that the Lord your God might bless you in everything you do” (Deut 14:29 CEB). We are also directed to leave some grain in the field so that the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow can have some means of support by gleaning from the remains left behind by the harvesters.

My mother-in-law, Naomi, likes to tell of her ancestor’s family. It seems that Judah, the head of our tribe, married and had three sons. He chose a wife for his oldest son, but he died with no children. Because of this, there was a rule in Israel that the brother or next male kin was to marry the widow and have children for the dead husband so his name and inheritance would be preserved in Israel. So Judah gave his second son to the widow to have children in place of his brother, but the

brother would not perform his duty to his deceased brother, and he died. The father promised his third son would be allowed to marry the widow, but he reneged on the agreement. When the widow realized she would not marry the third son she disguised herself and tricked her father-in-law to impregnate her. The child to this union became the head of our clan.

We, my husband and I, my brother-in-law and his wife Orpah, and our mother-in-law Naomi, all lived together in contentment. Then the unthinkable happened. After years both my husband and brother-in-law died! We were three widows, Naomi, Orpah and me! We had no male protectors, no fathers, no husbands, no brothers, no uncles. Naomi announced that she was returning to Bethlehem in Judah where food was available. Naomi urged us to return our families since she was too old to have sons for us to marry. Orpah stayed, but I insisted I would not abandon Naomi despite an uncertain future in Judah. I told her she and I were family and because of this I accepted her God and people, whatever that would bring.

In Bethlehem it was the time of the barley harvest, I asked Naomi if I, a widow, but also a foreigner, would be allowed to glean in the field of the farmers. So I went into a field to glean ears of grain for food after the harvesters, as the law permitted for widows. I met the owner of the field, Boaz, who blessed me by saying, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your family and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” I believed then that God had given me a home and blessed me for following my mother-in-law.

I said, “May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord.” “You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.”

Boaz gave me great hospitality, made sure I had food and water as I worked, which I later shared with Naomi. He then asked me to continue in his fields throughout the various harvests, and he instructed his young men to protect me. He is gracious to me because of my concern for Naomi and he treated me kindly.

When Naomi heard of Boaz and his kindness, she told me he was our next of kin, our redeemer. She reminded me of what she had taught me about young widows without children; how they could marry their kin redeemer. At the end of barley harvest Naomi made a plan for our long-term protection. She instructed me to go the harvest feast at night, wait until Boaz had feasted and gone to sleep, and uncover his feet as he was sleeping on the threshing floor. I washed, anointed myself with perfume, and put on my best gown, and quietly went to the threshing floor as Naomi instructed.

When Boaz found me at his feet he said, “Who are you?” And I answered, “I am Ruth your maid. So, spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative” (3:10). Naomi had explained to me that “spread your mantle” is used by God while establishing a covenant with Israel. Here, the phrase was a proposal of marriage. Boaz told me he was willing to marry me, but there was another male relative even closer. He sent me home to Naomi with enough grain to feed us and to sell for our other needs. Naomi said we would know that day whether Boaz or the other relative would marry me.

Boaz found the other male relative and, in the presence of elders, explained that Naomi needed to sell the land of Elimelech. The other relative said he would be glad to purchase the land. Then Boaz explained that the one who purchased land also had the responsibility to marrying the widow of Mahlon and caring for the widow of Elimelech. The male relative said he could not accept financial responsibility for the two women and gave up his lawful claim to marry me. Boaz then declared his intention to marry me. Unlike Naomi’s story of Judah and Tamar, his daughter-in-

law, who tricked him, my marriage was blessed as Naomi and I joined the house of Boaz, a generous and faithful Israelite man.

The elders then offered a prayer which ends, “With the offspring, the Lord will give you from this young woman, may your house become like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah” (4:12). Boaz and I have a son, Obed, his name means "Servant of God." His son is Jesse, the father of eight strong and handsome young men, and two intelligent and loving daughters. The youngest, David, is kind and had a tender, loving and forgiving heart.

Our story is one not absent of struggle, but we supported one another. We survived in the face of death and hunger, but we always believed that God was at work on our behalf. I don't know what the future will hold, but the God of Israel has blessed Naomi and me with joy. God has given us a home and a people. God has given me a wonderful mother-in-law, who had a plan for our protection. God has given me a wonderful husband. God has taken us under His wings of protection, provision and love. We went from being widows who were destitute, marginalized and unprotected, to women provided for, protected and loved. Not only did God use Boaz to protect us, now we have a son, a grandson, and eight great grandsons. We will never be without a protector.

And now I laugh, because Naomi has said that if God used Tamar to bless the people of Israel by being the mother of the head of our clan, who knows that God may do for our descents. I laugh because I am a foreign, immigrant, former widow. Yes, I honored my obligation to care for my widowed mother-in-law Naomi, and now I look forward more blessings and joy under the protection of our God. How will God use our family to bless our people? Who knows what God had in store!

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