

A Midnight Proposal

When Fairytales Come True – Part VI

Ruth 3:1-10

Introduction

It was Thanksgiving Day, twenty-nine years ago, when I proposed marriage to my college sweetheart. I had the ring in my pocket and the plan to propose over Thanksgiving break. I was going to Marsha's home in Atlanta, Georgia, for Thanksgiving with her parents. In order to understand my proposal, let me give a little background.

I grew up in a home where there was an unwritten rule for all four sons – we did not invite a girl home from college unless we were engaged or about to be. So, for the three and a half years that we had dated, while we were attending college in Tennessee, Marsha had never been to my home in Virginia – and she knew why. My parents had met her, of course, and thought she was truly remarkable, so I had that base covered.

I still had not asked her father if I could marry her and that was part of my plan over Thanksgiving break. So, I had the diamond engagement ring tucked away in its special box as she and I traveled to her home in Atlanta.

I surprised her father with my request when he went down to work in a basement area on the furnace. It was the only time I could get him alone. The fuller story was that since I had dated his daughter and broken up with her in the past, he was actually planning to ask me over the Thanksgiving break what exactly my intentions were with his daughter. I beat him to the punch, and he said, "Yes."

Later that day, when Marsha and I were alone, I popped the question. I started by saying, "Marsha, I

would like to take you to my parent's home over Christmas break."

I paused to let this sink in. Her eyes told me she was catching on.

I then added the words, "That is, if I can introduce you to everyone as my fiancée."

Another pause, and then I added, "That is, if you will marry me."

Marsha did a little bounce on her toes, wrung her hands, and said, "I don't know."

This is not the way it happens in the movies.

If Marsha were telling this story – which she is not allowed to do – she would tell the truth. Over the course of our dating, I often did something significant that expressed my love, only to break up with her soon after. I had terribly cold feet. So, when I proposed, she was afraid to say, "Yes," because she thought it meant I was going to break up later on.

For the next five minutes I gave her every good reason I could think of that I was serious and she should marry me! Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, but it was only a minute or two, she said, "Yes." I have been telling people ever since that I had to talk her into marrying me.

Now I do not know about other guys who are as old as I am, but I would actually love to be able to do this one event all over again and really do something incredibly romantic. I would love to be able to do it all over again and really get creative. At the time, I did not know what the word "creative" meant.

Most men struggle with the same thing – how to come up with the right timing, the right context, the

right words, and the right setting to hopefully get the right answer.

Perhaps you have seen the recent video clip of a guy who planned to propose to his girlfriend during a National Basketball Association (NBA) game halftime. He worked out an elaborate plan. He got her to center court for reasons other than a proposal, but then, as the cameras zoomed in and carried it to the jumbo screens and national television, he went down on one knee – and her hands went to her mouth in shock. He had a microphone and proposed – and she paused and said something to him that was tantamount to “No,” then hurried off the court.

This proposal went way wrong.

I googled wedding proposals to see what kind of help there is out there for guys on how to do it right – and how to do it wrong. I actually came across a web site with the cover page entitled, “How to Propose Marriage”. Guys are evidently still in need of some pretty basic help from what I read.

This web site started off by saying what not to do when proposing marriage and gave three things:

- First, do not propose to your girlfriend in front of her parents. How obvious is that!
- Secondly, do not put the ring in anything that is set in front of her to eat. The article goes on to say, “The last thing you want to do is have to propose to her while she is being wheeled into surgery.”
- Thirdly, and one that I thought was especially insightful, do not propose marriage two days after meeting her. Are guys idiots or what?! Do not answer that!

I came across some marriage proposals that were examples of how to do it the *wrong* way – these poor guys.

One lawyer made a deal with several policemen to arrest his girlfriend on totally bogus charges. They worked out the plan and carried it out to the letter. They stopped her car, read her rights, and drove her to the city jail where they told her she could have one phone call. She called her lawyer boyfriend, of course, who came and was let into her cell where he told her that the only way they would let her go was if she agreed to marry him. *That* is romantic!

Another man was so shy and did not know what to say to the point that he got completely tongue-tied after he pulled out the ring box – he just froze. So, he tossed the box to his girlfriend and began to run away. When she caught the box and saw what was inside, she had to chase him down to say, “Yes.”

Another guy pretended to have died and planned the entire funeral home visitation with him lying in the coffin. With his girlfriend sobbing as she stood by his casket, he suddenly sat up and asked her to marry him. After she stopped screaming, she slapped him, and then said, “Yes.” I think she needs help!

I then came across a couple of illustrations in which the guys did it right. They really pulled out the stops in their marriage proposals. These were unreal.

One guy lived in a different state from his girlfriend, so he mailed plane tickets to her. When she arrived, a limo was waiting for her, as planned, and the music in the limo was a compilation of their favorite songs. She was taken to a name-brand store where a rack of dresses and shoes were waiting for her, personally handpicked by this guy and the store manager. She was able to choose her favorite, get dressed, and was driven to a salon for a three-hour treatment – massage, pedicure, manicure, hair styling, and makeup. She was then driven to the entrance of a resort where a horse and buggy were waiting for her. As she was driven around the small lake, more than one hundred candles lit the path to a red carpet where violinists began to play a song this guy had written. While she walked up the red carpet, he appeared at the top of the stairs and began to sing the song he had composed. When she got to the top of the stairs, he knelt down on one knee and a light board behind him blazed the words, “Will you marry me?” He then stood and sang the finale to the song, backed up by a forty-five piece orchestra. When she said, “Yes,” fireworks exploded in the sky above them.

This was not a television show – he planned everything. This guy makes me sick! It is not fair to the rest of us. In fact, I hate to even tell this story because our wives are going to ask us later, “What were *you* thinking?”

Let me tell one more. I liked this guy’s idea. He and his girlfriend had bought an old repossessed home with the understanding that they were going to be married. They did not have a lot of money and did all the work themselves. Because they spent so much time working on this little house, they spent countless hours at Home Depot. Sometimes when they were too tired to work, they just strolled down the aisles and dreamed out loud of what they wanted to do in their little home.

So, when this guy was ready to propose marriage, he set it up with the manager at Home Depot. He phoned his girlfriend and told her to meet him there

that night. When she arrived, the manager directed her to the Home and Garden Section where this guy had a table set up with candlelight and a take-out dinner. After he seated her, he got down on one knee and proposed with a potted plant they could use later on. She said, “Yes.”

This is my kind of guy! Ladies, you can have a limo and fireworks or a potted plant at Home Depot. Let us take a vote. How many vote for Home Depot?

One of the most remarkable marriage proposals I have ever heard of is actually in the Bible. Only in this one, the girl actually does the proposing. She chose just the right setting and just the right timing – in fact, it happened at midnight.

Turn to the book of Ruth and we will watch this proposal unfold.

The Midnight Marriage Proposal of Ruth and Boaz

Let us get a running start and look back in Ruth chapter 2 at verse 23.

So [Ruth] stayed close by the maids of Boaz in order to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

If you were with me in our last study, you have no difficulty believing that by now, Ruth and Boaz are definitely in love. They have probably had many more lunch dates out at the job site, next to the harvest field. Boaz’s employees may have noticed that he has been much more interested in their work than ever before.

However, now there is a problem. Harvest time is over, and Boaz and Ruth have now parted, perhaps wondering if they will see each other again. Ruth has settled back in with her mother-in-law Naomi.

It just so happens, however, that Naomi is not about to let grass grow under anyone’s feet.

1. Naomi’s resolve.

Look at chapter 3, verse 1.

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?”

This is the long way of saying, “Ruth, I need to find you a husband.”

It was not unusual in these times for the wedding prospects and plans to be worked out between the mother and daughter in what was referred to as simply “the mother’s chamber”. Naomi was like a

mother to Ruth and she now takes on this matchmaking role.

I can imagine Naomi sitting Ruth down, saying, “Ruth, let’s look at the facts. I’m not going to be around forever to help you through life in this strange new land you’ve chosen to make your home. It’s obvious that Boaz is interested in you – he’s been dumping grain in your path for weeks now, he’s invited you to lunch, and he even has his staff bringing you water whenever you want it – the guy has got it bad!”

Then, Naomi removes any doubt about what she is after with the rhetorical question in verse 2a,

“ . . . is not Boaz our kinsman . . . ?”

According to Old Testament law, a widow could demand that the next closest relative who was willing and available, marry her.ⁱ

According to God’s plan, this marriage would provide Ruth with financial security. Even more interestingly, the children born to them would be given the name of her first husband, which would secure his name for another generation and his family farm or estate would remain in his particular family. This wonderful provision allowed for the widow to be cared for. (Deuteronomy 25:5-10)

So, according to the law, Ruth was actually the one to take the initiative. Her condition was not the same as that of an unmarried woman. In that case, the man was to take the initiative. As a widow, it was her right to let her intention be known to the kinsman. It was her move.ⁱⁱ

So, Naomi is urging, “Ruth, harvest season is over. You may never have another chance like this again; you might not even see Boaz until next year. He can redeem you if he wants. It’s time to let him know you want him to.”

Now Ruth was obviously a stranger to these customs. She was a Moabitess, not a Jew. These laws were still foreign to her, so she probably asked Naomi, “Well, what do you want me to do?”

Naomi, the matchmaker, says, “I’m glad you asked! I’ve been working on a plan.”

In verse 2b, Naomi says,

“ . . . Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight.”

How did she know this?! Naomi knows. She has been playing out this plan for some time – for just this moment.

Boaz is at the threshing floor tonight!

“ . . . Behold, he winnows barley . . . ”

I had no idea what this meant, but in order to observe this unusual proposal, we need to climb into this scene and set the stage.

I was raised in the city. My father was raised on a farm. In fact, he can talk about baling and planting and threshing. Had he not been led by God into the ministry before getting married, I would have grown up on a farm in Minnesota – milking cows at 4 a.m.

I asked my dad a couple of months ago, “How did you guys stand sub-zero weather in a barn, milking cows in the dead of winter?”

He answered, “Well, your hands stayed warm as you milked them, and you made sure you sat real close to the cow.”

All I can say is, “Praise God he went into the ministry.”

Growing up in Virginia, my family would travel back to Minnesota every summer. Among other events, we would drive to Butterfield, Minnesota, and attend the Threshing Bee. The whole town of 2,000 would show up. All the farmers would pull out all the equipment from generations past and display them, and even operate some of the old threshing machinery out in the field.

These were the most boring days of my life – the Threshing Bee in Butterfield. However, this was not boring for the farmers. They loved it – this was their life. The machinery had changed everything for their families – many of whom had been farming for generations.

Well, centuries earlier, another farmer named Boaz is hard at work. This is his life and he loves it. He is threshing barley with the workers at the threshing floor, which back in these days, they did most of it by hand.

Threshing floors in Old Testament times were constructed out in the open fields. They were nothing more than a patch of ground, usually selected at a high spot on a ridge where they could catch the night breeze.ⁱⁱⁱ

The workers simply raked off a large, flat, open area, swept the ground clean, and then lightly sprinkled water on the surface and piled rocks around the perimeter of what would be a smooth round area or threshing floor.

The sheaves of grain were brought in on the backs of the workers, donkeys, camels, oxen, or whatever the owner could use to carry them. The sheaves would be heaped in this circular threshing floor and then two or three animals would be harnessed shoulder to shoulder and simply driven

around and around the floor to separate the husks from the kernels with their hooves. Then winnowers took a shovel or a pitchfork and tossed the sheaves into the air allowing the breeze to carry the empty husks away while the heavier grain fell to the ground.^{iv}

The men, women, and children would work late into the night. It was always a time of celebration simply because the harvest was being brought in.

Also remember that Ruth chapter 1, verse 1, informs us that the land of Israel had experienced a deep famine. Comparing other passages, we know that it lasted seven years.

Later, in verse 6 of chapter 1, we are told that Naomi returned to Bethlehem because she had heard the famine had lifted.

We have every reason to believe that this is the first good crop Israel has seen in years. They were celebrating the goodness of God. Good times had returned to Bethlehem. This was a time of hard work, but also of laughter, joy, and feasting.

We know from other passages of scripture that during these days of the judges, Midianites had made a habit of invading the land and stealing the crops that had been threshed.^v

As a result of this, Boaz is also here at the scene, no doubt, to help protect his bumper crop from theft.

Now all of this relates to Ruth at one critical intersection: this is Ruth’s last chance before Boaz will leave the fields for several months. If she will make her desires known to him, now is her last chance to do so.

There are a few more details in Naomi’s plan, as she tells Ruth in verse 3a,

“Wash yourself . . .”

This Hebrew verb signifies the full treatment. Ruth got a pedicure and a manicure, and the Mary Kay lady came out and she had a color chart done.

Naomi says next, in verse 3b,

“. . . anoint yourself . . .”

This means literally, “Put on perfume.”

Did they have perfume back then? Listen, 1,500 years before the birth of Christ, the queen of Egypt is sending scouting parties all around the known world to bring her the latest perfumes for her collection.

Ruth still had some of her best – J. Vernon McGee used to say that her favorite perfume was probably called, “Midnight in Moab”.

Then, in verse 3c, Naomi says,

“. . . [Ruth] put on your best clothes . . .”

In other words, “Ruth, get all dolled up. It might be dark out there, but Boaz might call for a lantern.”

“Ruth, get ready to propose to Boaz.”

Naomi has even thought through the timing. Notice the latter part of verse 3.

“. . . go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.”

Naomi is a wise woman. She is telling Ruth, “Wait until Boaz has had his dinner before you try something major.”

Before you show him the dent in the car; junior’s report card; ask him to paint the house a different color – make sure he has had his dinner. This verse could not be any clearer. Here it is ladies – wait until he has had supper – it is biblical!

Naomi says even further, in verse 4a, for Ruth to wait until the work party lies down to sleep, “You don’t want to interrupt Boaz while he’s working in his ledger.”

Look at verse 4b for a rather strange detail.

“. . . 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.”

Now some would suggest that Ruth is told to go down and proposition him by uncovering his feet. They conclude that this expression must be a euphemism for sexual relations. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Boaz is a godly man. He will praise Ruth in a few verses for her moral character. He refuses to touch her until he has the legal right of kinsman redeemer. In fact, he asks her to leave at the break of dawn so that both of their reputations can be above suspicion.

Add to this the fact that the *Mishna*, a commentary on Jewish custom and law, would not allow a man to act as kinsman redeemer toward a Gentile woman with whom he had already been sexually involved outside of marriage.^{vi}

This protected a vulnerable widow from being abused; taken advantage of by the man who should have redeemed her first. If he does not redeem her first, he forfeits the right to her and to her former husband’s property.

He has to marry her first. “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage.” Do you remember this old rhyme? It happens to be the progression that God designed to protect women *and* men.

Ruth is not making some kind of lurid proposition to Boaz. She is told by Naomi to go down where he is sleeping and uncover his feet. Take the blanket off his feet and he will probably do what? He will wake up! It was a way Ruth could wake Boaz up in the middle of the night without startling him.

Notice verses 6-7a.

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 . . .

Others suggest that Boaz was drunk and Ruth came when he was incoherent to try to talk him into making a promise.

Again, the text answers ridiculous commentary that cannot stand the sight of a godly man – let us drag him through the mud to make ourselves a little more comfortable with our own compromises.

The text says,

. . . Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry . . .

This Hebrew idiom “*yatab leb*” simply means he was “in good spirits”.^{vii}

We would say that he was in a good mood.

Why not! It is a bumper crop. The famine is over. There is a huge pile of grain on the threshing floor. Boaz is incredibly happy. Is this a perfect night or what?!

Oh Boaz, you have no idea – it is about to get even better!

2. Ruth’s request.

Now notice verse 8.

It happened in the middle of the night . . .

The Hebrew text literally reads, “in the half of the night” which means, it was midnight.^{viii}

[Around midnight] the man was startled and bent forward; and behold, a woman was lying at his feet.

The word that is translated “startled” can also be translated, and better, I believe, as the word, “shivered”.^{ix}

Sometime around midnight, Boaz's uncovered feet are cold. He wakes up shivering, sits up and bends forward to put the blanket back over his feet. When he does, he sees the form of someone lying at his feet.

Notice verse 9.

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."

Literally, Ruth is saying, ". . . for you are a redeemer."

This is tantamount to Ruth proposing to Boaz. This is the biblical way of asking, "Will you marry me?"

Can you imagine this? Boaz's hair is all messed up; he has been snoring away; he is in his pajamas – is this love or what?!

Boaz wakes up to cover his feet back up and there is the woman he has fallen in love with already. And Ruth leans forward and says, "Boaz, you have a legal right to marry me – will you accept that right?"

Ruth has come to Boaz in the night. Perhaps she has done this out of respect for his character – not wanting to demand her rights; not wanting to force him to decide in public before the elders at the city gate.

It is possible that Naomi and Ruth already know there is another man first in line, as we will discover later, so Ruth has come secretly to let Boaz know her heart, and to let him know he is her choice – her heart can belong to him.

Notice how carefully Ruth has worded her proposal. There are two elements that are significant.

- **A symbolic custom.**

Notice again in verse 9 that Ruth asks Boaz to . . .

“. . . spread your covering over your maid...”

Ruth is not asking for his blanket because it is cold out there.

Ruth is referring to the Jewish custom of the bridegroom placing a "talith" upon his bride on their wedding day. A "talith" was a fringed garment belonging to the bridegroom that now covers his bride, signifying that he will take on the responsibilities of care and authority.^x

Ruth is effectively saying, "Will you cover me with your care and authority?" Or, in simpler terms, "Will you marry me?!"

Ruth has the right to ask. However, instead of forcing Boaz to play the role of kinsman redeemer; instead of bringing him before the public eye and potentially embarrassing him, she was giving him the opportunity of rejecting or accepting his right privately.

This is like Joseph, who did not want to embarrass his betrothed, Mary, when he discovered, to his horror, that she was pregnant. He intended to put her away privately because he loved her (Matthew 1:19).

Ruth loves Boaz and does not want to embarrass him publicly. Privately she lets him know she is available if he wants her.

- **A significant word.**

There is something else I want you to see. Ruth not only refers to a symbolic custom, she uses a significant word in her proposal to Boaz to . . .

“. . . spread your covering over your maid...”

As Ruth proposes to Boaz, she actually uses a derivative of a word that Boaz used when they first met.

When Boaz first met her out in the field in chapter 2, verse 12, he said to her,

"May 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."

That word that is translated "wings" is the same word Ruth now uses to say, "Boaz, spread over me your wings."

Ruth is actually asking Boaz to become the answer to his own prayer.^{xi}

She is asking Boaz to become the application to his own intercession.

Ruth effectively was whispering to Boaz, there on the threshing floor at midnight, "Do you remember the prayer you made on my behalf a few months ago? Would you like to be the answer to your own prayer?"

A few moments ago, Boaz had cold feet. Now the question remains, "Will he have cold feet?"

3. Boaz's response.

Not in a million years will Boaz have cold feet. He can hardly contain himself! Boaz whispers back, in verse 10,

“. . . "May you be blessed of the Lord, my daughter. . . ."

In the Hebrew this is all one word – and it is pronounced, “Yeeeha!”

“Shhh – you’ll wake people up.”

“I know, but I can’t believe you want me! Of course I want you, I fell in love with you the first time I saw you in the field.”

“Me too.”

You have to take years of Hebrew to see this.

Actually, Boaz’s immediate praise is to God for this remarkable woman, and his willing answer is, “Yes.” It is a ready, excited, unchangeable, “Yes, I want to marry you too.”

Boaz actually gives a longer answer and raises a serious problem with Ruth’s proposal. This is for our next discussion – do not read ahead.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/15/2009 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Shepherd’s Notes: Ruth, Esther (Broadman & Holman, 1998), p. 26.

ⁱⁱ J. Vernon McGee, Ruth: The Romance of Redemption (Thomas Nelson, 1981), p. 89.

ⁱⁱⁱ Warren W. Wiersbe, Ruth & Esther: Be Committed (Victor Books, 1993), p. 44.

^{iv} McGee, p. 91; Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., The Book of Ruth (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 200.

^v Stanley Collins, Ruth & Esther: Courage and Submission (Regal Books, 1975), p. 27.

^{vi} A. Boyd Luter and Barry C. Davis, Exposition of the Books of Ruth & Esther (Baker Books, 2005), p. 57.

^{vii} Hubbard, p. 208.

^{viii} Luter and Davis, p. 56.

^{ix} C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 1991 ed.), p. 484.

^x Collins, p. 29.

^{xi} Hubbard, p. 212.