

FIELD OF DREAMS

RUTH 2:10-3:15

Danielle Steele writes them... Harlequin publishes them... Millions of American women read them... They're called, "romance novels." Sadly, most selections in this genre of literature are racy and risqué. Browse the bookshelf at the local grocery and you'll get the impression that romance is always raunchy. But that's not true of all romance novels. The budding love between a man and a woman - their rendezvous and dialogue - their growing intimacy – should be wholesome and uplifting. Romance can carry spiritual not just sexual overtones. There is such a thing as a righteous romance, and that's what we find in the book of Ruth.

Ruth is a romance novel written by God... and ultimately about God... It's based on the true story of a man and woman who overcome improbable odds to meet, and eventually marry. The story features drama, suspense, passion, and lots of romance. The plot twists, and turns, and keeps you on the edge of your seat until the outcome is finally settled. God deserves a Pulitzer for the story of Boaz and Ruth. Think of Ruth as a biblical Cinderella... Boaz is a Jewish Prince Charming... Their unlikely romance occurs in the barley fields of Bethlehem.

Ruth was a Moabite maiden, an outcast in Israel. And in keeping with our Cinderella parallel... Ruth was the younger daughter in a nation full of mean older sisters. She was mistreated and frowned upon by her Hebrew neighbors much the way the older sisters treated the younger Cinderella. Yet when the little sister goes out to glean grain, she catches the eye of a Prince! **Boaz** was a barley baron – a big landowner. He was handsome, strong, wealthy, and (drumroll please)... single! Boaz sweeps Ruth off her feet. He takes her to dinner. He overwhelms her with privilege, and protection, and provision. Boaz was quite a beau. What a romance!

Of course the big difference between the story of Cinderella and the book of Ruth is that Ruth is no fairytale. No pumpkins turn into carriages. To the contrary, this is a story set in the rough and tumble of real life. And the miraculous circumstances that unfold are orchestrated not by a fairy godmother, but by God the Father! God's providence is on display!

Last week we left off in 2:18. We'll pick up the story in verse 19. Ruth arrives home after meeting Boaz. "And her mother-in-law said to her, "Where have you gleaned today?" Gleaning was God's welfare system. During harvest, rather than scrape a field bare, Israeli farmers were limited to a single pass. A bit of barley was left for the poor. The labor pool entered the field and collected the leftovers. It wasn't a handout. It was honest labor. God knows a handout humiliates, but work ennobles a man.

Ruth had come home with the mother lode. She had bundles of barley. According to 2:3 Ruth hit the jackpot because she just so happened to stumble into Boaz' field. The beautiful Moabite maiden caught his eye. Boaz favored Ruth. He ordered His servants to drop handfuls of barley in her path to make her gleaning easier. Naomi could see that someone liked Ruth. That's why she asked, "Where have you gleaned today?" And this is a great question for us. "Where have you gleaned (this week)?" For All of us are gleaners at heart. We're all spiritual gleaners.

Whittle away the trappings of life – amusements, and preoccupations, and the games that we play – and you're a Ruth. You're hungry and poor. Your soul is empty. You're spirit is growling, and you're busy gleaning...

We're always looking, and combing, and hoping, and groping, and collecting, and gathering what we hope will satisfy our deepest longings. You may think of yourself as a high-powered businessman, or a sophisticated socialite, but at the core of who you are – you minus your pride and your sophistication – you're nothing more than a beggar or a bag lady. You're dumpster diving - combing through life for a scrap or two.

Ever had a sugar buzz? You're famished and suck on a piece of candy. Your body is hungry because it needs nutrients and protein. But the sugar masks those needs. For a brief time the hunger pangs go away. This is what happens when the human heart sucks on meth, or crack, or porn, or cars, or food, or Wi, or Fantasy Football, or stock trading, or online Poker, or a business break-through, or big money. It's just a sugar buzz. It masks the soul starvation from which we all truly suffer.

So where have you been gleaning this week? Have you been wandering through the fields of accomplishment, or accumulation, or amusement - or have you been gleaning in Jesus' field? Jesus calls Himself "the bread of life." He has the nutrients and protein our soul needs. Everything else is a sugar buzz. Jesus satisfies our soul. As He told the woman at the well, "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst." Make sure you're gleaning in Jesus' field.

Naomi continues to ask Ruth, "And where did you work? Blessed be the one who took notice of you." Naomi was impressed by the abundance of barley Ruth had brought home. Obviously, someone had shown her favor. "So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz." And that was all Naomi needed to hear... "Boaz" could've just as well been "Bingo!" "Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he of the LORD, who has not forsaken His kindness to the living and the dead!" And Naomi said to her, "This man is a relation of ours, one of our close relatives." Naomi knows... If Ruthie plays their cards just right she might have a use for that wedding gown she's been storing under her bed. Boaz was a relative – a man with an obligation – he was in line to marry Ruth.

Boaz was what the Hebrews called a "Goel" or "relative redeemer." In Hebrew culture there were obligations among siblings. A victim's nearest relative had specific duties... If a brother lost his land, the Goel could redeem it, or buy it back... If a brother fell into slavery, the Goel could purchase his freedom... If a relative was murdered, who needs the police? The Goel hunted down the killer, and avenged his brother's death... And as we've mentioned, if a man died, his brother – or closet kin - was obligated to marry the widow and sire a son to carry on the family name. These were the duties of a Goel. And Naomi knows Boaz is THE MAN!

And as if this news isn't exciting enough. Verse 21, "Ruth the Moabitess said, "He also said to me, 'You shall stay close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.'" Boaz had shown a romantic interest in Ruth. He might just marry her, not only out of obligation, but for love's sake!

"And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, and that people do not meet you in any other field. So she stayed close by the young women of Boaz, to glean until the end of barley harvest and wheat harvest; and she dwelt with her mother-in-law." If Naomi is correct there's a wedding on the horizon. But at the moment, Boaz has his hands full. It's harvest time. He's got a lot of work to do. He needs to get the grain in the barn before the first frost. It's not the right time for the nuptials. Ruth is going to have to wait... Naomi tells her daughter-in-law to stay in Boaz' fields, hang out with his workers. Be content to glean from His crop. Have some faith and patience.

And isn't this what God is asking us to do today? This isn't just a romance novel about a ancient couple, from an agrarian society, in a far-away town called Bethlehem. This story is amazingly relevant. Ruth is a type of the Church - a Gentile bride. We happened into a field owned by Jesus. He loves us. He's poured out His blessings on us. Our only responsibility is to stay put. God expects us to feed our souls on only what comes from His hand. We're to glean only from His fields. This is faith. Put all our hope in Jesus. Trust Him exclusively.

And Boaz is our Jesus. There's a wedding in the air for you and me... But today, Jesus is supervising a great harvest of souls. It's when the harvest is done; then Jesus returns for us, and the wedding party begins.

Chapter 3 fast forwards a few weeks. Naomi knows the end of the harvest is near. Ruth's gleaning was just a temp job. After the harvest Boaz will forget about his barley fields. She doesn't want him to get away. And she senses it might be time for Ruth make a move.

In fact, in every love relationship there always comes a time when you have to take a risk... make a move... step out and show some initiative... The guy who dates a girl for ten years is afraid to take a risk... I think back to the day Kathy agreed to marry me. Wow, was she a brave woman. She was taking a huge risk! I had no job, no money, no 401K, no inklings of success. I was dashingy handsome, but I was a risk! Marrying me was as safe as jumping off a bridge on a frayed bungee cord. But when she heard God say, "Jump!" the girl was willing to jump.

There comes a time when romance gets risky. And Naomi proposes a dangerous move in chapter 3. "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? Now Boaz, whose young women you were with, is he not our relative? The only "security" for a young woman in Ruth's world was marriage. And match-maker Naomi is about to go to work. There's even a **Goel** in play. Boaz is the prime target. Naomi has the old boy in her crosshairs. She's even done her research. Naomi says, "In fact, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor." This was a large outdoor pavilion where the last stage of the harvest took place. This marked the climax of the growing season. This is the time and place to seize an opportunity.

Here's Naomi's plan. She tells Ruth, "Therefore wash yourself and anoint yourself..." Take a bubble bath. Splash on some sweet perfume. Boaz is a Jewish Gentlemen. He'll love a whiff of that Hallel No.5. And "put on your best garment..." Ruth needs to put on her cute little peasant dress... Remember, the only time Boaz has ever seen Ruth is when she's been out in the field - when she's not dirty, skanky, and stinky. Naomi wants Ruth to doll up. Let Boaz see what he's missing.

"And (then) go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking." Now here's some good advice if you're a single woman who'd like to have a husband. First, don't play "the desperate woman in a panic" role. The last thing you want to do is throw yourself at a guy. Don't act anxious. Be cool. It's said, "Some single women are like baseball players - always trying to turn a single into a double." It's okay to desire to get married – even say so – but you'll scare a guy off if you try to manipulate and control him.

Second, when it comes to getting married make sure you take your advice from a woman who's married. A single gal is foolish to only listen to her single friends. There might be a reason your friends are single.

Ladies, listen to a woman who has a man – a happy man – and who’s had him for a while. Get advice from a woman who understands men. This echoes Paul’s advice to Titus, “the older women... (should) teach the younger women to love their husbands, to love their children...”

Third, don’t smother a man with your own insecurities. The romance of Boaz and Ruth got off to a red hot start. It might’ve been love at first sight. Boaz poured out blessings on Ruth. He lavished her with his love. But after that initial burst, the relationship seemed to fizzle. Apparently, Boaz got distracted with business and barley. There was no second date. Ruth wondered if he’d forgotten about her. **Were they just friends? Did he have feelings for her?** She was anxious to have a heart to heart talk.

Yet Naomi knows men. She’s had a husband and two sons. She knows the worse move Ruth can make is rush him with her insecurities. She needs to let him eat and drink. He’s worked hard. Let him relax. Wait until he gets a good meal on his stomach – something to wash it down – let him watch some football. After he’s decompressed, then approach him. Ladies, never bombard a man the instant he walks through the door. Let him recover from his day, before you tell him about yours.

Here’s was Naomi’s advice in a nutshell - Don’t throw yourself at a man, but there comes a time when you have to get in his way. Men are dumb. Ladies, when you meet a man you walk away thinking, “Does he like me? Was my perfume too strong? Did I make a stupid comment? Will he’ll call me?” The guy walks away thinking, “I’ll order pizza when I get home!” Some guys miss the obvious. That’s why you have to get in his way.

And that can get real risky... Listen to the rest of Naomi’s advice, “Then it shall be, when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies; and you shall go in, uncover his feet, and lie down; and he will tell you what you should do.” Woe, this doesn’t just sound risky – this seems reckless. Hosea 9:1 implies the only women who frequented the threshing floors were prostitutes. The male field hands had just celebrated the end of the harvest. They probably drank too much. They had money in their pocket. This was a business opportunity for Bethlehem’s brothels. Why would a noble young lady like Ruth – known for her character – risk her reputation to approach a man after dark at the threshing floor?

Here’s my take on this passage... Neither Naomi or Ruth had anything promiscuous or immoral in mind. This was not Ruth the she-devil out to seduce Boaz. But there are times when love has to take a risk. Both war and romance are risky ventures. If you’re going to advance there are times when you have to step out from behind your shield and become vulnerable. You have to expose your heart. Risk being rejected. Your love for the other person has to exceed your fear of getting hurt.

It’s risky getting married, and pledging loyalty for life to another person.

It’s risky having kids. Cute little babies grow up and go their own way.

It’s risky starting a business. There’re so many factors you don’t control.

It’s even risky serving the Lord. A missionary gets malaria... A pastor gets fired for speaking the truth... The guy you help, steals from you...

Here’s the truth... **all of life is a risk!** Everything worth doing is risky business. I’ve checked the labels. Life comes with very few guarantees. There’s no such thing as a risk-free relationship. Life is unpredictable.

People who always play it safe, and are scared to take a risk, seldom accomplish much. You can be so fearful of a wreck you refuse to drive. If you want to live deep – and make a difference in life – and leave behind a big footprint there're times when you have to crawl out on a limb.

I read recently where senior citizens in Naperville, Illinois gather twice a week to play softball. And it's risky business for the folks who dare to play. Not only do some of the senior citizens risk sprains, and bruises, and breaks, but a few of the elderly players have even suffered heart attacks. One of the players was asked why he takes such a risk. He explained, "If I'm going to die, I'm going to die doing what I love doing, whether it's playing softball, fishing, hunting, or something else." When you're so afraid of dying that you stop living you might as well be dead. Life is full of risks. If you're waiting on perfect seas to set sail you'll stay docked in the harbor forever. Ultimately, you have to trust the winds of God's providence.

Granted, Naomi's instructions to Ruth were a calculated risk. She knew Boaz. Both her and Ruth had confidence in his integrity and morality. By the bounty Boaz had given Ruth, he'd also proven how much he loved her. Naomi's plan was a measured risk, but a risk nonetheless.

Apparently, Boaz had concluded he didn't deserve a girl like Ruth. He was older. She was younger. He's a stuffy, boring businessman. She's a beautiful gazelle. Boaz feels like a Bozo around Ruth. He figures she's out of his league. No way a girl like Ruth would want a man like Bo. Naomi knows... It's time to take a risk. Ruth needs to pay him a visit. And Ruth was willing. "She said to her, "All that you say to me I will do."

Verse 6, "So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law instructed her." The threshing floor was the place where the barley was separated from the stalks and husks. The work was done in the evening when the Mediterranean winds blew in from the west. The barley was tossed into the air, or ground under the hooves of oxen. If a few grains blew away one of the workers would say, "Aw shucks!" Well, this is why Ruth slips up undetected and stands in the shadows until Boaz settles down for the night. Verse 7, "And after Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was cheerful, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain..." Boaz worked hard all season. His stomach is full. He's had a few glasses of wine. Now he picks a spot and unrolls his blanket.

"And (Ruth) came softly, uncovered his feet, and lay down." She peeled back the covers just enough so his toes would get cold and he'd wake up. "Now it happened at midnight that the man was startled..." You know what it's like to wake up out of a deep sleep. You're groping to get oriented. You're not sure where you're at, or who you're with, or which way is up... "And (he) turned himself; and there, a woman was lying at his feet." And he said, "Who are you?" So she answered, "I am Ruth, your maidservant." And she doesn't beat around the bush with small talk. She cuts to the chase... "Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative." Ruth is telling him, "Boaz, you really need to marry me!" Even today, in Middle Eastern cultures, when a man throws his robe or scarf over a woman it's the equivalent of placing a ring on her finger.

Ruth is asking Boaz to do his duty. He's her "relative redeemer." Yet no matter how you slice it, this is a bold move! It took nerve for a Middle Eastern woman to approach a man with a mandate for marriage.

The universal custom even to this day is for the man to propose to the woman - not vice versa. This was bold and brash. For any culture - in any era - this was outside everyone's comfort zone. Ruth was courageous. I think it all indicated just how much Ruthie desired to marry Bo.

And certainly, this is all in keeping with the spiritual allegory portrayed in the book. Ruth is the Church... Boaz, like Jesus, is Lord of the Harvest... When they first met, Boaz showered Ruth with barley and blessing. She was overwhelmed. But gradually his barley no longer satisfied Ruth. She was no longer content with his blessing she wanted Boaz himself. She wanted to be more than his servant. She desired to be His bride. She found sufficiency in his fields, but now she longs for intimacy in her heart. The grain is no longer enough. Now she's hungry for the guy.

And this is the progression that should occur in the Christian life. We all start out a gleaner. We comb the fields and scrape the stalks for God's blessing, but over time we realize blessings come and go with the changing seasons - the real source of our joy is the One who blesses. I love the lyrics by AB Simpson, "Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord. Once it was the feeling, now it is His Word. Once His gift I wanted; now, the Giver own. Once I sought for healing, now Himself alone. All in all forever, only Christ I'll sing; everything in Christ, and Christ is everything." The gifts of Jesus are only intended to whet our appetite for a deeper fellowship with the Author of those Blessings. Our goal is God Himself.

This is what Ruth is saying to Boaz. I don't want your barley, without You. Rather than tokens of your love, I want to live with my Lover! Rather than a place at his table, she wants to wake up each morning in His arms. This is real love. Kathy could shower me with lavish gifts – tickets to the Masters, Red Rock Ginger Ale, new golf clubs, one of those fancy I-pads - but I wouldn't be satisfied with a zillion gifts if I couldn't have her. And it's not only possible, but expected... to get that way with God!

This is what Thomas a Kempis meant when he prayed, "It's too small and unsatisfactory whatever You bestow on me, apart from Yourself." God's blessings are just a foreshadowing of His presence and His glory. Psalm 42 expresses this sentiment. "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God..." After being a Christian 30 years, Paul said his goal was "To know Him..." Not His healing - not His wisdom - not His wealth... but Him!

It's interesting, Boaz will have to sort out a few complications to fulfill Ruth's request. Boaz will do all the work. But it was Ruth who had to ask. And the same is true of your salvation. Jesus does everything, but the asking. If you want to know God – really know Him in your heart – you have to take a risk. You have to move outside of your own comfort zone. You need to come to Him humbly, and bow at His feet, and submit your life, and will, and heart to Him. And be willing to do whatever He tells you... Come with that attitude, ask Him to redeem you, and He will! Romans 10:13 says it best, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Verse 10 "Then (Boaz) said, "Blessed are you of the LORD, my daughter! For you have shown more kindness at the end than at the beginning, in that you did not go after young men, whether poor or rich." He couldn't be more elated! Boaz dreamed of marrying Ruth, but didn't think it possible. He thought she'd go for some young man, but she didn't.

There were all kinds of shortcuts Ruth could've taken, but she was committed to doing life God's way. She was devoted to the will of God. Originally, Naomi told Ruth her best chance for remarriage was to stay in Moab – go back to her own people - yet Ruth chose to follow

Naomi's God despite her slim odds. She wanted to know the one, true God. When she arrived in Bethlehem she could've again taken another shortcut. When Boaz, her relative redeemer, drug his feet, she could've attracted any number of young men. But she trusted in God's way. Ruth reminds me of Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

Here're a lesson for singles... Don't turn marriage into an idol. I've seen singles put a desire for married above all other concerns – even God's will. He'll marry a non-Christian. She'll have sex with a guy hoping he'll marry her. He compromises his relationship with God to cultivate and please a partner. Trust me, this all will backfire and you'll get burned. Ruth valued her relationship with God above ever other relationship in her life – even above her opportunity to get remarried. Ruth did romance God's way – waited on God's time – and ended up getting God's best.

Boaz continues answering her in verse 11, "And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you request, for all the people of my town know that you are a virtuous woman." He definitely wants to marry Ruth. But there's one catch. He says, "Now it is true that I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I." And with those words, I'll bet Ruth's heart must've skipped a couple of beats. She had no idea! There's another relative redeemer who has first dibs. This is why Boaz was dragging his feet. As I often say, "I've never been to a wedding that went off without a hitch!" This throws a whole new wrinkle into the story...

Boaz tells Ruth, "Stay this night, and in the morning it shall be that if he will perform the duty of a close relative for you - good; let him do it. But if he does not want to perform the duty for you, then I will perform the duty for you, as the LORD lives! Lie down until morning." And notice, Ruth doesn't balk. She's done things God's way from the beginning she won't cut corners now. You can never go wrong doing life God's way. If God is in it, He'll work it out. If not, it's better off knowing now.

"So she lay at his feet until morning, and she arose before one could recognize another. Then he said, "Do not let it be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." The town gossips would've drawn the wrong conclusions. Boaz is a gentleman. He wants to protect Ruth's reputation! Single men pay attention. It's not just your responsibility to protect a woman's innocence. You need to guard her reputation. If you respect her, you'll avoid situations that cast a shadow of suspicion over her character.

Verse 15 "Also he said, "Bring the shawl that is on you and hold it." And when she held it, he measured six ephahs of barley, and laid it on her. Then she went into the city." Not having a box of chocolates handy, Boaz loads Ruth up with 6 bushels of barley or about 70 pounds. He wants there to be no doubt about his commitment to her and her mother-in-law. Bethlehem is about to host a big wedding, but first there's work to do. And Ruth will have to learn to trust her husband... but that's next week...