

Courtship or Dating or Doing “the Ruth Method”? (Ruth 2-3)

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Please turn in God’s Word to the book of Ruth, and in our ongoing verse-by-verse study through this book we come to a very timeless and timely question: how do a man and woman go from meeting to marriage? Should they date, or court, or “dort” (some in-between)? In church history there was a council/synod of Dordt (renouncing Arminian theology, didn’t deal much with premarital relationship). Actually in church history, this type of debate is quite recent because this type of dating is quite recent. Many don’t know the concept we know as “dating” is relatively new in human history, 80-90 yrs old in US, even newer in some similar cultures. Ellen K. Rothman (not a Christian) records the following in her book *Hand and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America*:

‘A first-class revolt against the accepted American order took place among American youth in the 1920’s. This was not a sudden eruption, but rather a series of seismic tremors that occurred with increasing intensity and frequency through the 1910’s and 1920’s. By 1930, the terrain through which young Americans passed en route to marriage would be almost unrecognizable to their parents. In 1900, middle-class courtship was more carefully supervised; by 1930, the supervision and formality had given way ... and many of the familiar landmarks were swept aside. What they [modern daters] did was to develop a systematic, peer-controlled approach to the social and sexual relationships of late adolescence and early adulthood.’¹

Another secular source traces the transition from former courting models focused on the girl’s father, family and home environment for courtship/relationships after the Civil War:

‘... men conducted formal “calls” to her home, during which couples might converse, read aloud, play parlor games [this is late 19th century] ... As the century progressed [to 20th], however, new opportunities for interacting outside the home emerged. College enrollments rose, and students [away from home at that age more than before] developed their own rules governing relationships. More women entered the workforce, particularly as schoolteachers. And especially in urban areas, new public diversions like dance halls, amusement parks, theaters, and parks enticed courting couples away from the safety of their parlors [automobiles, urban / social revolutions]... popular magazines and advice columns quickly outlined new rules to replace the old. By 1925, traditional courtship had fallen out of fashion.

Instead, young couples began to go on “dates,” which differed significantly from courting: They cost money, focused less on long-term commitment, took place in public [culture shift away from parents], and were initiated and paid for by men [and before long there came to be expectations from men in return]. Standards of sexual morality also changed, and the terms “necking” and “petting” ... entered public discussion [and the process in larger measure] ... In some circles, young people dated widely, rather than with one exclusive partner, since status hinged on being seen regularly with different desirable dates ... In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, the sexual revolution [took place] ... Couples still dated—some going steady—but [sexual activity] and living together became a widely accepted step toward marriage ... “Singles” clubs and bars proliferated, and people of all ages sought congenial partners through dating services, the “personals” sections of magazines and newspapers, and Internet sites ... as both men and women assumed more individual responsibility and initiative in finding a mate than at any previous time, while also exercising greater freedom in the process.’²

What supposedly evolved in the “roaring 20’s,” *devolved* significantly in the sexual 60s and 70s and most in the church also got involved in a similar premarital process, but with Christianized warnings to not sleep with / live with before marriage, don’t marry those who don’t profess Christianity, and if your relationship really progresses then eventually you announce intentions to family to get married, and when the wedding gets close then you get input from the church (rather than family and church family involved before, during, and throughout relationships for their counsel and care like in the past).

By the end of the 20th century, conservative US Christian culture in growing numbers began to revisit 20th century Western-American practices of dating and re-evaluated its common assumptions in light of Scripture and recognized many dangers (I think in a good way). Some kissed dating goodbye, at least in its recreational worldly forms. In its place many have revived courtship models.

In many Christian circles, websites, bookstores, churches, and communities, this has become quite a hot topic in the last couple decades. I don’t know that I actually heard the term courtship much or at all growing up (ex: GCBC “Q&A”). Some Christians may think “to court” = go to traffic school, “suitors” sell 3-piece suits (my own confession)! Even pro-courtship books I’ve read define courtship in different ways, as we in this room might, too. The one time I remember the term *courting* growing up was in the old movie “7 Brides for 7 Brothers” - the sister-in-law teaches the uncivilized brothers how to court girls (be polite, be gentlemanly, dance, etc., and it’s all set to a song “goin’ courtin’”). But if you actually read the lyrics of the song or see how they did it then I don’t think any of us Christian dads would want our daughters to find a man that way! In fact, their dads weren’t even involved and had to come with shot-guns to try to get their daughters back! All that to say, just using the term “courtin’” doesn’t automatically fix sin problems. As Josh Harris says in one of his books on courtships, a godly person who only knows ‘dating’ may honor God more than an ungodly “courtshipper.” But I want to move beyond labels and terminology and precise methodology to what Scripture says.

You won’t find the word “date” in the Bible unless it’s a tree, and you won’t find “courting / courtship” either, which may surprise some who assume biblical characters lived like early frontier Americans, and that every gal in Bible times wore gingham or denim dresses and guys got to know them on prairie house porches after church services where they sang from the same hymnal we use and read from the 1611 KJV, because “if it was good enough for the apostle Paul, then it should be good enough for us, right?”

Let’s not approach this question first with American glasses on, but let’s put *biblical glasses on* and as best we can transport back to Bible culture, interpret the OT properly in light of the NT, and then try to draw out applications that apply to every culture. If you study *inductively* (as a Christian before an American) how men and women actually got together in biblical times and cultures, you find there were a lot of different ways they got together that were not only radically different than 20th century American dating practices, but were also in many ways different than 18th-19th century American courtship practices. If our only choices are between the two, the older American family values and practices I find much wiser and safer in many ways, so you can put me in the courtship camp. But recognizing wisdom in one way more than other is not the same as saying there’s only one way God’s Word lays out in precise step-by-step detail for all time.

Should we follow Boaz and Ruth's method? Or should we betrothe as Mary and Joseph did? Or be arranging marriages like others did in the OT? Let's read together how it occurred for Ruth and Boaz in their ancient Israelite culture, which I guarantee will look more than a little different than our culture, even those who strive to be most "biblical." But by God's help we want to discern principles from this passage that transcend culture. We'll be reading Ruth 3, but I want to first set the historical context by starting in chapter 2:

⁵ Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?" ⁶ The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi ... [Boaz notices her. He gathers some information about her and her character as we'll see and then he takes initiative and approaches her and says in v. 8] "My daughter [personal family term of tender-kindness in their culture], listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls [provision]. ⁹ Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you [protection]. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." [practical kindness] ¹⁰ At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground ...

Now, single guys, don't expect a woman to fall at your feet like this in our culture in your first conversation ... but a godly man who treats others in a godly way will stand out. A lot of guys think goofiness is the key to getting a girl, but godliness is key to a godly girl (or it should be). It wasn't coolness or craziness that impresses Ruth here, it's kindness (guys and girls should both take note). A man who shows practical and thoughtful kindness, who protects her purity and honor, and provides for her needs, and personally speaks to her and treats her as a family member, is a godly man (Paul tells Timothy to treat younger women as sisters w/ purity).

In v. 1 Boaz is called a "man of standing," i.e. substance, noble and strong beyond wealth. Here he proves to be a generous gentleman, a man of character and kindness, far beyond OT cultural norms.

¹⁰ At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "**Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?**" ¹¹ Boaz replied, "**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 father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before.**" ¹² **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.**" ¹³ "May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "**You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls.**"

Boaz speaks kindly, comforts, praises and prays her blessing ... Ruth is humble, honoring to him, to Naomi, and to the LORD ...

¹⁹ Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said. ²⁰ "The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers." [I'm reading from NIV]

²¹ Then Ruth **the Moabitess** said, “He even said to me, ‘Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.’ ” ²² Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, “It will be good for you, my daughter, to **go with his girls**, because in someone else’s field you might be harmed.” ²³ So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished [i.e., several weeks go by]. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

3:1 One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you [or “rest” or “security”], where you will be well provided for? [i.e., husband. Remember, parents in Bible times often arranged marriages for their children, and still do today in some similar Eastern cultures. “Matchmaker mom” goes on...]

² Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³ Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

So here it is, a biblical 7-step plan for getting a husband (this is the closest the Bible ever comes to a detailed manual or method for single gals to find a mate, so ladies take notes, ok? Ready?)

Step 1: Wash up (v. 3)

Step 2: Put perfume on

Step 3: Put nice clothes on

Step 4: Wait till he finishes eating and drinking so he’ll be in good spirits after a good meal (is this kind of like not having a deep relationship conversation with a guy while he’s in the middle of eating chicken wings watching a ballgame? After?)

Step 5: Scope out and stake out where he’s sleeping stealthily

Step 6: When he sleeps in the middle of the night lay at the foot of his bed, pull the covers off his feet, and wait till he notices

Step 7: When he wakes up, he’ll fill you in on the next steps ...

Shall we close in prayer? No need for further explanation?

This doesn’t sound like much like courtship in colonial America, does it? I mean, let’s just be honest and admit this seems weird to Western culture 3,200 years later. I checked on Amazon, and there aren’t any books on relationships I can find that take this passage as a template for getting a spouse (though other manuals exist).

No Christian teacher or Christian dad I know would ever recommend his daughter do this in the middle of the night today, and I want to argue that’s not its point. There are things here very hard for us to understand as modern Americans. I don’t think even OT readers would consider this regular / recommended for women in general! Is Naomi giving Ruth a cultural way to declare herself eligible for marriage? What’s going on in this text could easily be mistaken sexually and many godly men have fallen to less of a temptation. We can think of other dangers with this daring “date night.” The text itself raises more questions than it answers.

One commentator explains: ‘as for the right moment, Naomi shrewdly calculated its arrival: *until he has finished having his dinner*. Obviously, she wanted Boaz to be in good spirits – that sense of contentment and well-being which results from a good meal ... she calculated as carefully as she could to set up a favorable situation: Boaz would be in a happy frame of mind, and the two would talk alone, away from gossipy ears ... She also implied that other people might be present, hence the precaution that Ruth carefully follow his movements. No amount of darkness would hide the embarrassment of approaching the wrong man! ...

By lying at his feet, perhaps Ruth was to present herself as a humble petitioner seeking his protection [f.n. “feet” connote submission to authority] ... Apparently, he would respond to Ruth’s symbolic gesture with some instruction of his own. Thus, Naomi took into account ... the character of Boaz ... that he would not take unfair sexual advantage of the situation ... In any case, the strange venture was no doubt a risky and daring one [like Esther?]. Naomi asked Ruth to enter an uncertain, compromising situation [potentially at very least] with a great deal hanging in the balance.

Nagging questions plague the reader at this point, however ... Was it a custom well known to the audience or Naomi’s own (and highly unusual) invention? Why didn’t she directly approach Boaz or the town elders on the matter of Ruth’s marriage? Unfortunately, firm answers are elusive ... Naomi’s ploy was simply an acceptable but unusual way to break the impasse ... the theological question was: Would human plans collide or would God’s plans? Would God bless the clever plan of Naomi the matchmaker or, as with Abraham’s ill-fated move (Gen. 16; 17:18) annul it with a divine no (Gen. 17:21)?³ This is drama!

⁵ “I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered. ⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. ⁷ When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down.

⁸ In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet. [ESV has more literally, “behold, a woman lay at his feet!” – a modern English equivalent of “behold” might be “whoa”! Drama heightens]

⁹ “Who are you?” he asked.

“I am your servant Ruth,” she said.

“Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.” [drama really picks up – this is not in script!]

This request doesn’t just mean she’s cold and would like some of the blankets, please (although it was a cold night). She is asking him as a close relative to provide covering for her in life, protect her, take her under his wing (using his own words from 2:12 but suggesting he answer his own prayer, redeem by *marriage*)! To an OT Heb. reader she’s at least *proposing he propose* (i.e., “you’re a kinsman who can redeem in marriage, what do you *propose* we do about this situation?”). *Putting a garment over* had engagement / wedding overtones that he picks up on in the verses that follow. This is somewhat veiled language to express her desire to wear a veil and dress as his bride (veiled to us but clear to Boaz, v. 10-13).

The end of v. 9 is critical ... *since you are a kinsman-redeemer*. It is only because of biblical principle and responsibility she appeals.

In Jewish OT law, Deuteronomy 25 specified that a widow could initiate a request for the next of kin (brother) to marry and carry on the family name if she had no son, and if he would not, she could let the Elders know, so this actually was a biblical precedent of kinsman-redeemer she is alluding to at the end of v. 9 (though this situation is a little different, and combines another OT law concept of redemption and levirate marriage, she is appealing to Scripture). This process isn't in any modern book on courting or dating, but Ruth wants to be married by God's Book and ways, as does Boaz.

The image of garment-covering in marriage is carried on in some Christian circles whose young girls wear head-covering to show their submission to their father's headship, and in the wedding, the husband assumes the covering as she comes under his leadership. A similar biblical custom is still attested among Arabs where a man will put a garment-cover on his bride during a wedding.

Daniel Block explains: 'in common Hebrew usage "to spread one's wings over someone" was a euphemistic idiom for marriage [See esp. Deut 22:30; 27:20 (including the intimate privileges of marriage); Mal 2:16; Ezek 16:8.]. The gesture of a man covering a woman with his garment was a symbolic act, which according to Near Eastern custom signified "the establishment of a new relationship and the symbolic declaration of the husband to provide for the sustenance of the future wife." ... Boaz interpreted this immediately not as a demand for sex but as a proposition for marriage, a conclusion supported by his response in vv. 10–13.'⁴

Is this an example of Moabite feminism or foolishness of a young believer being presumptuous? There is humility to be sure in Ruth lying under his feet and referring to herself as "your servant," but it sure doesn't seem like proper protocol: a woman approaching a man, a Moabite to an Israelite, a poor person to a rich person, an employee to her employer, and at midnight in a barn of all places!

It's hard to know what to conclude about Naomi and Ruth and how wise this plan was, but praise the Lord that an imperfect process (courtship, dating, doing Ruth's method) can bring imperfect people together as part of God's perfect plan w/ Lord's blessing!

¹⁰ *"The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied.*

What a godly man! Wakes up cold and a blessing comes out of his mouth! Yahweh is on his lips and he recognizes this LORD is there to bless and Boaz doesn't rebuke her, he wishes the Lord's reward again, and recognizes even in the dark, her heart of loyal love:

"This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor."

This along with the term "daughter" indicates Boaz was quite a bit older and apparently quite a bit flattered that she considered a guy like him to be her kinsman-redeemer (she had younger options). At the end of this verse he recognizes Ruth is not someone who runs after men (he didn't get the wrong idea about her and neither should we) and he also recognizes her risking all this to do this was another manifestation of her extraordinary loyal love to Naomi:

"This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier" (from 2:11, now she's outdone herself, she saved the best for last)

3:11 *now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character ... [only woman besides Prov. 31 with this title in OT!]*

The character of Ruth and Boaz shines in questionable times. And I want to argue next week that the character of a man and woman is far more important than a cookie-cutter methodology or one-size-fits all approach to courting or dating. In other words, God's people following God's principles is more key than man's process.

When two young people from 2 Christian families are interested in each other, the ideal is certainly for godly mentors and members of their family, church family, and especially for both godly dads to guide the couple's relationship following biblical principles. If any young guy wants to date / court my daughters in the future, I make no apology if I sound or act "old school," determining how and when my 3 treasured daughters will see guys (after they're 25?).

The ideal situation would be for Ruth's father and Boaz to have a talk; dad invites him to have breakfast at the Bethlehem Square falafel shop and has this talk, instead of Ruth's awkward approach. But the Bible recognizes not every family is ideal, sometimes the gal has no godly dad and/or is far from home (like Ruth) and the courtship model that relies heavily on godly dads must recognize that dads aren't always there. And not everyone will kiss "dating" goodbye altogether, but what principles apply to any relationship?

That's what we'll look at next week, but if you're looking for a foolproof formula, you won't find it with fallen foolish people like us. There are out there strict courtship cookie-cutter molds or methodologies or programs (just as there are books for biblical potty-training and nursing your kids Christianly), but I'm not going to be able to give you a definitive manual or one-size-fits-all step-by-step plan, because I haven't found one in this Book. But I have found much in God's Way by way of principle in this area that I hope will be helpful to our families and future families here, whether you want to call it courtship or something else.

But we need to make sure we interpret OT passages properly (the crux of many a debate theologically and practically). Some families in 18th century America allowed courting couples the controversial practice of "bundling" (sleeping in same bed as part of their courtship but with a bundling board in-between them with a bundling sack that was like a double-sleeping bag sewn up in the middle or the guy might be sewed up tight during the night, separately ... nevertheless this was one courtship model that didn't always preserve purity). I bring that up because it was said that the precedent for bundling came from the biblical story of Ruth and Boaz spending a night together under the same covers, and they went on to become husband and wife, so why not? It's "biblical," some said.

Key distinction in studying OT accounts: discerning descriptive vs. prescriptive passages. Is a text just describing what happened, or is it prescribing how we must do it? Careful Bible students recognize the difference between a narrative and an imperative (command). We need to pay attention to context, which includes culture, and to distinguish between biblical customs and biblical commands.

So for example, some courtship advocates like Jonathan Lindvall will argue that a modern version of betrothal should be practiced today, and of course they can point to a famous NT example of betrothal. But Mary and Joseph's *customs and culture* are not a *command* for us to get together exactly how their parents arranged it, anymore than requiring we use mangers to put our newborn babies in, since "that's how they did it." And biblically speaking, betrothal wasn't the only way godly people got together in Bible times:

- Sometimes mother-in-laws set up young gals in weirder ways on threshing floors late at night, and they married the next day, but that's not a command we do it like Ruth did
- Sometimes prostitutes were rescued by spies and converted and married an Israelite man, like the mom of Boaz, but it's not normally required/recommended (except for Hosea 1)
- Sometimes a guy had to work for a future father-in-law 14 years before he would give his daughter to him (but is that more about getting a wife or watching out for tricky dads?)
- Sometimes a guy fell asleep and woke up with a bride (and a sore rib like Adam with Eve) but usually guys need to take more initiative!
- Sometimes a dad put his hand on the thigh of a servant and says *find a wife by going to the country of my relatives*, and if a girl at the well waters your camels, etc., bring her back (and in that case, the son didn't see her before their wedding)
- In Judges 21, you can read this just a few pages before Ruth, another pre-marital strategy: go to a party, hide, and then when the girls start dancing, run and grab one you like and carry her off and then you can be married to her?
- In Judges 14, should we emulate Samson's premarital process? He says to his parents "I saw a pretty Philistine girl ... get her for me" and at their objection, he insists "She looks good, get her for me." If things go bad after the wedding, should we destroy all in-laws or their fields?
- Or in 1 Samuel 18, the book right after Ruth, the pre-marital protocol for David is to bring back 200 foreskins of Philistines after killing them ... Hey, it's a "biblical" way
- And in chapter 25 another way it was done was the servants of the king propose to the woman Abigail on behalf of the man (better than the Ruth 3 at least, one might argue)
- On other occasions the marriage was setup with gifts of camels and treasures and servants as payment to dad-in-law
- The Exodus 2 method is another, if a guy has 7 daughters and you can fight off the harassing shepherds and water the flocks, the father of the girls will give you one afterwards
- You say, "ok, those are OT cultural examples, so let's look at just OT commands instead?" Sounds simple enough ... let's try it:
Deuteronomy 21:10 "*When you go out to battle against your enemies, and the LORD your God delivers them into your hands and you take them away captive,¹¹ and see among the captives a beautiful woman, and have a desire for her and would take her as a wife for yourself,¹² then you shall bring her home to your house, and she shall **shave her head** and trim her nails.¹³ "She shall also remove the clothes of her captivity and shall remain in your house ... [find a pretty prisoner-of-war, shave her head, take her as wife]*
- Another way to get a wife by the commands of the Law would be to wait for your married brother to die and then you must marry his wife or be disgraced in public (Dt. 25)

Those are just a sampling of the patterns, common was arranged marriages, but other pre-marital patterns are recorded in the Bible as well.

How are we to understand and apply the principles of the Bible to pre-marital relationships, whatever you want to call them? That's what we want to consider next week, interpreting the OT in light of NT principles and precepts, and considering what in this story of Ruth and Boaz and other OT accounts are not merely describing ancient customs and cultures but are prescribing God's will for single young men and women for all times.

¹ Ellen K. Rothman, *Hand and Hearts — A History of Courtship*, (Basic Books, Inc., 1984), pp. 289-90.

² <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O119-CourtshipandDating.html>

³ Robert L. Hubbard, NICOT, 203-5.

⁴ Daniel Isaac Block, vol. 6, *Judges, Ruth*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 691–692.