

RUTH 3 “DON’T BE AFRAID”

Have you heard the latest...on quicksand?

You’ve probably only seen quicksand in the movies or on TV. You know: Gilligan or the Skipper or Mr. Howell would blunder into it, and soon all you would see is the hat they were wearing!

You want to stay away from quicksand. If you step into it, you sink - so much and so quickly, that you may get sucked all the way under, and die.

The latest is, that’s not true. Somewhere, someone with way too much time and money on their hands has done a study. The conclusion? You can’t completely sink in quicksand. At worst, you will sink to just above your waist.

Does that make you feel better? Does that make you want to run out, find some quicksand, and jump in?

Of course not! If you step in quicksand, even if it won’t suck you all the way under, you are still in big trouble. You are completely helpless. You are utterly vulnerable. You cannot resist animals who may harm you. You cannot avoid waves from storms. Even if the quicksand itself will not kill you, it may render you so weak, that you will be harmed or even killed in other ways.

In the book of Ruth, we are following the trail that leads to the birth of Jesus. We have seen that Jesus enters a world of:

* Bitterness. Jesus has come to suffer bitterness, so that we may have the sweet hope of eternal joy.

* Lostness. Jesus has come to bring God’s favor to us - favor upon favor upon favor.

Now, in Ruth 3, we discover that Jesus enters a world of fear.

Fear is something like quicksand. Maybe it won’t kill you by itself, but as you sink into it, you are in a place of great danger.

You know this.

You know what you fear. Maybe you fear death. Maybe you fear illness. Maybe you fear poverty. Maybe you fear suffering in the ones you love.

You know what you fear does to you. You know how it distracts you. You know how it may consume you. You know how it might paralyze you.

Our fears can render us completely helpless and utterly vulnerable.

Let’s enter again into the story of Ruth.

She has come to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi. They are widows. They face a life of poverty and uncertainty.

But the true God has stirred Ruth’s heart to turn to him, and she has seen his favor as she has gone gleaning in the field of Boaz.

Yet Boaz is not just a kind man. He is a close relative of Naomi, so he could marry Ruth, and give her a family and a future.

How did this work? We don’t know all the details. In the Old Testament law, when a man died, his brother was told to marry his widow. Yet here, we don’t know exactly how Boaz is related to Naomi. So we don’t know if the Old Testament law applies here. And even if it does, will Boaz obey that law?

Naomi decides to give it a try. She and Ruth work out a plan to approach Boaz and claim that he should marry Ruth.

At the end of a long day, Boaz is on the threshing floor. This is where the grain would be separated from the chaff. Boaz will sleep on that floor, because he wants to protect his harvest.

Ruth will lay at his feet and ask him to spread the corner of his garment over her. If he does this, he will be claiming her as his wife.

But will he? Ruth is fearful. WHAT MIGHT RUTH FEAR? Her fears sound a lot like our fears.

Will she fear MAN? In other words, what might Ruth fear about Boaz’ response to her?

She knows something about him. She has received his favor. But what will happen if she approaches him about this?

We might see some fear in how she plans for this.

She wants to wear just the right clothes - and perfume.

She wants to wait for just the right time - after Boaz has eaten, and is relaxed and content.

She wants to show just the right attitude - an attitude of humility, as she lays at his feet.

But how will he respond? Would her fear of this man, become reality? Would he...

* Reject her? Because the writer of Ruth does not describe the exact nature of the relationship between Naomi and Boaz, we do not know if Boaz must accept Ruth’s “proposal”, according to the law.

And even if Boaz must accept it, he still may be reluctant or resistant.

* Abuse her? Women, imagine this situation. You will sneak into where a man you hardly know is sleeping alone, in the hope that he will wake up and be respectful of you. Ruth is easy prey for a man who is sexually, physically, or verbally abusive.

* Shame her? Might he accuse her of wrongdoing in approaching him like this? In this small community, he could destroy her reputation, and he could damage any hope of her marrying again.

What might Ruth fear? She might fear man. She might fear people.

Maybe she should! Why do we fear people? Because they can and do hurt us! We have been born into a broken world, and in a broken world, we suffer from broken relationships.

Yes, we are sinners. Yes, we rebel against God, by hurting other people. But sometimes we are the victims of the sin of other people.

Maybe you are a victim of rejection.

You just wanted your father to say he loved you.

You just wanted that "friend" to shut up and quit heaping abuse on you.

You just wanted your spouse to be faithful.

Maybe you are a victim of abuse.

Sexual abuse: over and over and over, and although all knew, none spoke.

Physical abuse: from a parent who did not know how to discipline in love, or from a spouse who did not care enough to love.

Verbal abuse: names that hurt you so much, that you would prefer sticks and stones.

Maybe you are a victim of shame.

You have been accused unjustly.

You have been slandered viciously.

You have been portrayed falsely.

When you are a victim, you have a hard time relating to others as you should. You fear who is next. You fear what is next. Maybe you fear too much. But it really doesn't matter. You are hurt, and you fear more hurt.

What might Ruth fear? Man? What might Ruth fear? GOD?

God? Yes, God.

No, God is not abusive, like people can be! But the book of Ruth reveals this: God's sovereign hand is upon everyone and everything. Yes, Ruth wants to follow the true Lord. But...

* What might he do? As we have learned, the Lord is the unstoppable, unopposable, the "Sadday" of all. Ruth has seen bitterness from his hand. What might he do now?

* Will this be bitter? She wants good to come from this. But what if his plans are different from her plans? Will she be rejected, abused or shamed? Will she continue to live a bitter life of poverty and uncertainty?

What might he do to you? What bitterness might he bring to you? You sometimes wonder about this, don't you?

You see the suffering of others. You suffer yourself. If you know God is sovereign over this, you may wonder what he might do to you, and if bitterness is his will for you.

This sometimes takes the form of superstition, even for people who say they believe in God. A woman in Denver recently wrote of the superstitions her mother taught her:

* "If you leave the house and then forget something and have to go back in, sit down and count to 10."

* "If there's a tree directly outside your front door, hang a small mirror from the door to deflect bad spirits."

* "Never let anyone hand you anything with a point on it; it severs the relationship. Let them put it on the table instead so you can pick it up."

* "Spiders that come out to greet you are good luck. Do not kill them."

Superstition is really suspicion. You may not have a list like that one, but you may suspect that God may be out to "get" you. So you live before God in fear.

Do you fear God? Not in the good sense of honoring God, but in the sense of feeling a terrified fear about what he might will for your life?

You live in a world of uncertainty. You do not know what might happen in the next year, the next month, the next day, or even the next hour. Such uncertainty may spur fear in you, as you realize you are not in control of the future. You dwell on the uncertainty and the possibilities, and you may start to sink beneath the weight of fear, just as you sink into quicksand.

What might Ruth fear? What might you fear? What might I fear? Man? God?

Boaz says, "Don't be afraid", maybe because he knows that this helpless and vulnerable woman,

sitting at his feet in the darkness of night, might fear so much - from him, or even from the God he worships.

WHO CALMS RUTH'S FEAR?

Have you heard about one of the newest ways to help people deal with their fears? It's called virtual reality exposure.

If you are afraid of speaking in public, you stand up and speak in public, wearing a virtual reality helmet, and speaking to computer-generated people.

If you are afraid of flying, you ride in a virtual plane, with virtual sights, virtual sounds, and, I suppose, virtual airline food.

If you are afraid of spiders...you get the idea!

That may not be a bad idea, but as we search the words of God's revealed truth, we find calm not in experience, but in relationship.

Who calms Ruth's fear? If Ruth's fear is stirred by her relationships with man and God, then they must be involved in calming her fear.

Who calms Ruth's fear? MAN?

Boaz is a godly man. As one writer says, "Boaz is shown quietly handling the situation like a gentleman, and not either as an old fool or a village lout."

Let's enter the story again, and see how Boaz calms Ruth's fear.

* He respects her. Surely he has been startled by the presence of this woman, laying at his feet while he sleeps. But what does he say? "The Lord bless you, my daughter. This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor."

Boaz realizes Ruth has been kind to her family, because she has looked to the family for marriage, instead of simply following her natural desires.

Boaz also shows his respect when he declares that Ruth is a woman of "noble character." She is not like other women. He knows it. He says it.

* He comforts her. He says, "Don't be afraid." He knows she is helpless. He knows she is vulnerable. Surely he knows of men who would respond to Ruth with rejection, abuse, or shame.

Boaz will not respond in these ways. He assures Ruth that he will find a way to resolve this matter, one way or the other. There is another relative who is closer to Naomi, so he should have the first opportunity to marry Ruth. If he wants to, he will. If not, Boaz will.

* He protects her. If people know Ruth has been there, there may be some shame for her. Again, we don't know all the details of these customs.

So Boaz says, maybe only to himself, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor." He protects her reputation.

* He helps her. He tells Ruth to hold out the shawl she is wearing. Then he pours barley into it. It must be a lot of barley, because he does not just hand the barley to her. He pours it into the shawl, then puts the shawl back on her, as you would put a large pack onto someone's back.

What blessing! What goodness! She might fear him, but he soothes her fears, with his respect, his comfort, his protection, and his help.

It's not really the most important truth here, but it is worth pausing and pondering for a minute.

We talk about ministering to other people. We all come to this day with our fears. We will all enter our week, before people with fears.

Do you have a heart for being a person who will calm fear? Maybe you cannot fix what brings fear. You cannot change the situation.

But you can minister to others, as you bring a heart of respect, comfort, protection and help to the fearful people around you.

Who will you see this week, that is sinking into the quicksand of fear? Who needs a Boaz in their life?

Yet as we have seen already, this book of Ruth is not just about people. If we just see people relating to people, or if we just think of this as a good love story, we miss the heart of this book.

Who calms Ruth's fear? Just man? No. Does GOD? Yes, God is the ultimate fear-calmer, in this story.

We see this, when we see that it is God who is working through Boaz, to bring calm to Ruth.

God has worked in his heart. Boaz is truly a man of honor and nobility. Yet he himself, would give all glory to God for that. We know that, as we read of how the Lord's name is the first word out of his mouth.

"The Lord be with you!" he calls to the harvesters.

"The Lord bless you," he whispers to Ruth.

The Lord has favored Boaz. He has blessed him with faith in the true Lord of all. Then the Lord

uses this work of grace in Boaz's heart, to calm Ruth's fears.

So then we can say that not only has God worked in Boaz's heart, but God has worked in her heart. Ruth has known bitterness. Ruth knows fear. Ruth is not certain of how this will all turn out.

But in his grace, the Lord has allowed Ruth to move forward in faith. He has turned her heart toward her mother-in-law, so that she has come to her home and her God. He has given her the courage to lay at the feet of a man she hardly knows, so that she might receive the blessing that could be hers.

Boaz is a pretty good guy. Ruth is a pretty tough lady. But God is the hero here. He is the hero, for he is powerful to calm the fears of this one who is helpless and vulnerable.

But for the third week in a row, I ask: what does this have to do with Christmas?

We are on the trail to Jesus. As we will discover next week, Ruth will be the mother of Obed, and Obed will be the father of Jesse, and Jesse will be the father of David, and David's trail will follow all the way to Jesus.

But for now, we ponder this: Jesus enters a world of bitterness, and a world of lostness, and a world of fear. Jesus enters to defeat our fear of men, and to calm our fear of God.

Let's go in reverse order.

What about the fear of God? How does Jesus defeat this fear?

This fear dissolves before the reality of God's goodness. The Son of Ruth, Jesus Christ, secures the goodness of God for us.

In his book called "The Great Deluge", Douglas Brinkley tells stories of so many who survived so much last year, when Katrina struck.

There is the story of Patrick Wooten. He lived in New Orleans. After defending his home against looters, he was first taken to the airport, where he slept on the floor with other people, and with dogs. Just imagine what it was like. After too many days, he was taken to Maine.

Patrick and the other passengers on the plane were met by an army of volunteers - an army of hugging volunteers.

Patrick later remembered, "You come out there and getting off the plane, I said, 'Oh, man, I really don't want to do this to these people, touch them. I'm stinky.'

"And so they're overlooking that filth, you know what I'm saying, man? 'Come here and give me a hug'. I say, 'Okay, here you go, but I'm stinky.' They ain't worried about how stinky I was. They said, 'Come here.'

"I said, 'Oh, man, this is love.'"

To use Patrick's word, we are stinky. Our sin makes us stinky before God, and God hates stink!

But Jesus has come into this stinky world, to take our stink. He took the stink of his people, on the cross. Through faith in Jesus, we can know God will no longer smell our stink. He will smell the perfection of Jesus. He has taken our stink, upon himself, and he has given us, his cleansing.

If I still stink, I should fear God. But if my stink has been given to Jesus, I no longer fear, for I know I have received the goodness of God.

This is love.

Do you fear God today? Has Jesus taken your stink? Then do not fear God. Yes, he is sovereign. He may bring bitterness.

But you do not need to fear, for even in the bitterness, you may know the favor and goodness, of the God who has loved you so.

What do you fear from God?

Do you fear the unknowns of tomorrow? What possibilities swirl in your mind? Do not be afraid. God is good to stinky people, cleansed by his Son.

Do you fear the uncertainty of a situation? Is much beyond your control, little in your control, and your fear out of control? Do not be afraid. God is good to stinky people, cleansed by his Son.

Do you fear the inevitability of death? Yes, you say you believe, but is your fear of death sinking your faith in God? Do not be afraid. God is good to stinky people, cleansed by his Son.

What about the fear of men? How does Jesus defeat this fear?

If our fear of God dissolves before God's goodness, our fear of men dissolves before God's greatness. Jesus is the Son of the sovereign Lord, whose hand prints are all over the book of Ruth. He has lived, died, risen, ascended, and now rules at the right hand of his Father.

He is bigger than the people we fear. His greatness is great enough, to stop, defeat, or overcome, even the worst that men can do.

I have been reading of the life of Charles Spurgeon. History records him as a great preacher, but reality is that he was easily frightened and so often depressed.

At the age of 15, after just a year of knowing Jesus, Charles went into a season of fear. With the encouragement of his grandfather, he was soon able to write these words:

“Fear begone! Doubts, fall back! In the name of the Lord of hosts I would set up my banner.

“Come on, ye demons of the pit, my Captain is more than a match for you; in His name, armed with His weapons, and in His strength, I dare defy you all.

“...I am a worm and no man, a vanity, a nothing; yet hath He set His love upon me, and why should I tremble or fear?”

Have you been rejected? Have you been abused? Have you been shamed? Have you? Might you?

The demons of the pit, and the people who do the work of the demons of the pit, will not defeat you, as you stand in the strength of Jesus, who is so much bigger than even the biggest of people.

He can stop the one you fear. He may defeat the one you fear. Even should he permit the one you fear to attack, he will ultimately overcome the one who would harm you, now or in eternity. And as you confront even fears that become reality, you always have his care, his help, his comfort, and his goodness.

Do you believe this today? Or are you sinking into the quicksand of your fears?

Who calms Ruth’s fears? Who calms our fears? It is Jesus, who is good to bring his goodness to us, and who is great to bring his greatness for us, as we struggle in a world with quicksand.

Though dark be my way, since He is my Guide,
‘Tis mine to obey, and His to provide;
Though cisterns be broken, and creatures all fail,
The Word He has spoken, will surely prevail.
The Word He has spoken, will surely prevail.