

The Book of Ruth

One Fine Day

by Steve Zeisler

If you're a baby-boomer, you'll probably remember a song from the early 1960s by the Shirrelles, called *One Fine Day*. It's recently gotten some air time because it was used in a recent movie of the same title. It starts,

*"One fine day you'll look at me,
and you will know our love was meant to be.
One fine day you're gonna want me for your girl."*

How do satisfying relationships begin in the real world? We live in a culture that would probably answer that question in one of two ways. One answer is that good relationships happen by dumb luck, fate, or some arrangement of the stars. You just stumble into a relationship. We occasionally hear the phrase "lucky in love." Consider the folk wisdom about positioning yourself so that a lucky strike will hit you. For example, if you catch the bouquet thrown by the bride, you'll be the next to get married.

The other answer is that technique is everything. We learn how to manipulate, seduce, persuade, and captivate somebody by saying exactly the right words, looking exactly the right way.

I was in a grocery store not too long ago looking at the magazines near the checkout stand. Here are some of the article titles:

"How to Attract the Woman of Your Dreams!"
"Getting that Man to Commit"
"The Five Keys to Sexual Ecstasy"

They are all about techniques, ways of manipulating someone special so that they will be enamored with you.

The Bible has a different way of talking about the creation of love and marriage. In this study we're going to look at the wisdom of Scripture on this subject.

Before we take that up, however, I want to step back for a moment. Every time we talk about marriage, especially loving, maturing marriage, many people react against it, because either they're in a bad marriage, or they're not married and want to be. So I want to make this point at the outset: Marriage is certainly not the only gift that comes from God. And when we look at the "one fine day" when Ruth and Boaz were allowed to meet one another, what we learn from that will apply to all the gifts God gives us. If God wanted to give you stewardship of some important resource of his, how would he go about giving you that gift? If God wanted to give you a good friend who would be part of your life and you part of theirs, how would he go about giving you that gift? If God wanted to call you into a ministry of significant influence on people's lives, how would he go about giving you that gift? In seeing how Ruth and Boaz were given the gift of each other, we'll learn something about the way God gives all the other kinds of gifts that he gives. So this passage is useful even if marriage isn't a topic of particular interest.

GOD PREPARES US FOR HIS GIFTS

But this is a love story about how God created a man and a woman, shaped their lives, and then on one very fine day gave them to each other. Let's look back at the very first marriage for a moment, because it will give us a way of thinking about what we read in Ruth. In the garden God made a man with his hands,

scooping up dust from the ground and molding it. The Hebrew verb there is sometimes used for the way a potter takes something and molds it with his thumbs and fingers. The man was the handiwork of God. The man spent some time—perhaps years of his life—learning about the world from God. They walked and talked together. Even then God was still forming the man with his words and his companionship.

The woman had the same experience. God put the man to sleep, took a rib from his side, and fashioned the woman. She too was his handiwork. And while the man was asleep she too had intimacy with God by herself. He talked to her, instructed and encouraged her, and fashioned her on the inside as well as the outside.

When the Lord had made them each what he wanted them to be, he brought them together and gave them in marriage to each other. It wasn't blind luck or technique. For those who love God and give him access to work in their lives, good marriages come as a gift from him because he first has access to make them what he wants them to be. He fits them for the gift he is going to give them. His hands, his words, and his heart fashion them. Then one fine day he brings the two together into a setting where a relationship can begin that will last a lifetime. That's what happens in Ruth 2.

I want to note two things before we read the passage. First, the narrator tells us something that the players in the drama don't know. Verse 1 says, "Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth [substance], of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz." We are being told that Boaz is going to be very important. But Ruth and Naomi will enter into the action of chapter 2 without anticipating Boaz' role in the scheme of things.

Someday we may very well get to see the "tape" of our lives in heaven. And in heaven we'll see our life story completely differently. We'll realize that a conversation that seemed innocuous at the moment would lead to a significant outcome. We'll know that because we'll know the end of the story then. But God knows the end of the story right now. He is orchestrating things for us now, knowing what is important and what isn't. The perspective of the narrator here is the perspective God has on our lives at the moment. There is somebody who knows the future, even though we don't know it.

The second thing I want to note is that chapter 2 is the story of just one twenty-four hour period. In the first five verses of the book ten years whizzed by. A famine started and ended, a family migrated, two marriages were made, and three men died. Now we have an entire chapter that covers just one day. That also ought to persuade us to listen very carefully to the details, to observe the scene, to wonder and enter into what these people experienced. For three thousand years people have been blessed by reading what took place on this particular day when Ruth and Boaz began their relationship.

Verses 1-3:

Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth [substance], of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

The word "gleaning" may be unfamiliar. The law of God firmly established this provision for poor people. It forbade Israelite landowners to reap their property to the very edge. They had to leave a border of grain standing so poor people could gather enough to survive. And if reapers inadvertently dropped some on the ground, they had to leave it there so that the poor people could come and pick it up. That was gleaning. So Ruth set out to glean at the barley harvest.

Verses 4-16:

Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, "May the LORD be with you." And they said to him, "May the LORD bless you." Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" And the servant in

charge of the reapers answered and said, "She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab. And she said, 'Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.' Thus she came and has remained from the morning until now; she has been sitting in the house for a little while."

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw."

Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?"

And Boaz answered and said to her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. 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."

Then she said, "I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly [to the heart of] to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants."

And at mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar." So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left. When she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. And also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her."

At the end of the process of marriage-making in Genesis 2, God woke Adam up and gave Adam and Eve to each other. Realizing that it was a very fine day indeed, Adam said,

"This is now bone of my bone
And flesh of my flesh."

He was saying, "This is the one I've been seeking. This is the one I've been fitted for, and she for me."

Using that as a template for thinking about this story, here is the corresponding day in the life of Ruth and Boaz. The question we might ask is, Why did God appoint this day for them to be put together in the field under these circumstances? What made them ready for each other today?

HOW RUTH TRUSTED GOD'S WORD

Let's think about Ruth first. What do we know from the book so far, especially the opening verses of chapter 2, that tell us what she was like? She had to persuade Naomi that gleaning was a good idea. Naomi didn't resist at any length, but neither did she take initiative. She might well have gone out herself in the field. But Naomi was withdrawn, hurt, broken, and filled with self-pity. Remember at the end of chapter 1 she said, "Call me bitter. God has dealt badly with me." She had no hope or energy or direction. Ruth had to say, "Naomi, there is one open door for people like us. Do you know what we are? We're poor. The law says that poor people may go into the field and pick up enough grain to eat. I'm going to trust that the one door that God has opened is the door we ought to go through. I'm going to trust that he loves us enough that this is the right thing to do."

It was actually dangerous to do so, because the time of the judges was a lawless time. Poor people would

take some risks to access even something that was rightfully theirs. But Ruth believed that she lived in her Father's world, the Scriptures were trustworthy, and God would be faithful to his promises.

How might we bring this perspective of Ruth's into our own setting? You know what your world consists of. Maybe poverty is the issue for you, too. Or maybe drivenness is your problem. Maybe your life is careening out of control, you're overwhelmed with responsibilities, you can't possibly keep up, and you're damning yourself for falling behind in every way. What might be the Scriptural perspective that speaks to people who are living out-of-control lives? You might turn to Hebrews 4:9,11, for instance, where it says, "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God...Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest...." Rest is the calling of God for his people. We are supposed to live lives that are at rest on the inside. That is the open door God has provided for you.

Maybe anxiety is your problem in life. Maybe a sense of dread has descended on you for some reason-circumstances, an inner struggle. You might find that Philippians 4:6 is the word you need: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." For anxious people, if the word of God says nothing else, it says to pray.

All of us, whatever our lives consist of, have wisdom from Scripture, insight from the way the Lord has made things and what he has said about them. All of us have an open door that we can walk through, believing that this is our Father's world and that he keeps his promises. We can wake up on a given day as Naomi did, consumed with self-pity, and do nothing, or we can say, "I have only one open door, but that's enough. I'll walk through, and go where the word of God directs me to go. I'll live like a Christian instead of being absorbed with myself."

That's the kind of woman Ruth was, and we can detect the handiwork of God. She had been taught some hard lessons and had learned from suffering. She had been made ready to receive a gift from God.

Then we have the wonderful, understated descriptions of events. It says that she "happened" onto the field of Boaz, which of course ought to make us smile, because she no more happened onto that field than she created the sun. God directed her specifically to the place at the time when he was going to give her a gift. She was walking along completely unaware of that, thinking only that she was setting out to walk through the door God had opened for her, and by the end of the day she hoped to have enough food to eat.

She turned into a field she came to for completely arbitrary reasons as far as she knew. It was the most important place and the most critical moment possible. But she had no inkling. She went out and started working hard. It was hot, and she was dripping with sweat and tired. Finally after working for a long time, she took a moment's rest in a shelter. She was bedraggled, sweaty, and unattractive. She sat alone. She probably spoke with an accent, being from Moab. She was different. She didn't know of the two men, off in the distance who were talking about her. Boaz said to his foreman: "Who's that?" Without Ruth's knowing it, everything in her life was going to change in just a moment.

HOW BOAZ RESPONDED TO THE SPIRIT

What can we say of Boaz by trying to read this story imaginatively? First of all, as I've already mentioned, the story has slowed down tremendously and we're hearing a number of conversations. One of them even sounds like "hello." He greeted his workers: "May the LORD be with you." They replied, "May the LORD bless you." Why in so short a short do we have the record of a standard greeting. This may have been a routine comment, but in the mouth of Boaz it was much more than routine. What he said represented what he believed.

As far as he was concerned, it was an ordinary day. He had no notion that he would meet anybody new or that anything unusual would happen. When he walked out to his workers, the first thing he did was call for the blessing of God in their lives. That was true of him every day. Every day, every place he went, he was anxious to find out what God was doing and how God might bless the people he encountered. He lived life as an adventure, assuming the wind of the Spirit was blowing. "May the LORD be with you" meant "May God's best be realized in your life: comfort, strength, hope."

Because he was attentive and interested, because he wanted what was best for people, he noticed the new person among the workers and regular gleaners. If he had been a different kind of man, he might not have even noticed. But he was immediately attentive, because he was always attentive to people and what God was doing in their lives. "Who is she?" he asked. A different sort of man might have been complaining, "Don't we have enough gleaners around here? Why doesn't she go to someone else's field? I'd have more crops if there weren't so many of these gleaners." But Boaz asked the question because he wanted to bless. He thought, Here is another person God has brought into my life. If I knew something about her I might be able to wish God's best for her also. He wasn't in love with her and didn't expect to be. He treated everybody that way.

Boaz didn't know that this was the day when he would see for the first time the person who would be the center of the rest of his life. But he had a lifestyle of expecting God to use him to do good, and that created the opportunity. Do you see how the fingers of God had fashioned this man? He had been made ready to be made a good husband, to have a good wife. He had been matured, and sensitized, fitted for the gift.

Once he found out who Ruth was, it got better. He had heard her story. This was the Moabitess who loved God and served Naomi. He knew God wanted to reward people like that, to do good to people who loved him. Boaz said to himself, If that's what God is doing, I want to be involved. He prayed for her to be blessed and then he acted to bring blessing to her. "You should have what you lack. May God give it to you. And I want to serve the interests of God by being his instrument."

WALKING THROUGH THE DOOR GOD OPENS

I'm convinced that at about this point (between verses 12 and 13) this story takes a bit of a turn. Ruth trusted God, came to the field of Boaz, asked permission to glean, gleaned hard, didn't feel sorry for herself, accumulated what little bit she could, and was grateful. Boaz showed up giving blessings because he always gave blessings, wanting to do good, wanting to join in the concerns of God. Then they saw each other. And shortly there was more to their conversation than the honest good will with which they spoke to everyone. They began to converse and act in ways that showed that they were more interested in each other than they had expected to be, and they each appreciated the attention of the other. They were falling in love. This was the "one fine day" for them. God had fitted them for each other, and now he had brought them together.

Reflecting on this, I asked my wife, Leslie, about our life together, wondering whether this ever happened to us. How did we end up together? We both decided that there was indeed a "fine day" for us. We had been friends for four years. We met working at Young Life camp. It had been a good and important friendship within a circle of friends. But we had never been together just she and I, or had thought about each other in any focussed way.

In the spring of 1970 I was trying to take a plane to Portland to go to Willamette University in Salem, Oregon for a week of student ministry. Leslie was at the end of her spring break and was returning from her home in Walnut Creek to Seattle, where she went to school. We had talked a bit and probably had arranged to get on the same flight, although only on a casual basis. The plane was supposed to land in Portland, where I would get off, and then continue on to Seattle. But God appointed a fog in Portland, and the plane couldn't land. So I had to go on to Seattle. There was no good way to get transportation back to Oregon that day.

So we unexpectedly spent a day together. She showed me around Seattle a little bit. I ended up spending the night sleeping on the floor at her place. From that day on I began to think differently about this friendship. Two years later, almost to the day, we were married.

God delights to give good gifts to his children, among them the gift of marriage. Blind luck or fate is not how Christian people end up in godly marriages. Seductive technique is not the key. Seductive technique may work well enough that you end up capturing the wrong person. You might end up with somebody who will make you miserable for the rest of your life, if it depends on you. But God makes us ready for his gifts, prepares us to receive them gratefully and to use them with grace.

When we look back on our lives when we get to heaven, how many times are we going to see gifts that we walked by? Perhaps we went by the field of Boaz a hundred times because we weren't willing to let God steer us, or we weren't willing to have what he wanted to give us. We were so consumed with self-promotion, or self-pity that we weren't cooperating with his hands as he was making us what we ought to be.

Ruth listened to the word of God. She went through open doors that the Bible declared were for her. Let me read some of the words of God and ask you to meditate and pray about them. Perhaps these are God's words for you:

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves."
(Romans 12:10.)

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me." (John 14:1.)

"...Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season...." (2 Timothy 4:2.)

"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another...." (Hebrews 10:25.)

"Be still, and know that I am God...." (Psalm 46:10.)

These are Biblical admonitions to God's people. Someone like Ruth will get up in the morning and say, "That's what I need to hear. That's what I believe, and that's who I will be, because God is faithful to his promises."

If we can say Ruth loved the word of God, Boaz trusted the working of the Spirit of God. He entered places and relationships listening for what the Lord was up to, wanting to serve the purposes of God. He noticed things.

Most of us sit in the same place in church each week. We can probably identify the people around us. What if three weeks in a row someone who usually sits near us isn't there? Would we wonder about it and want to do something about it? That was the way Boaz approached life. He expected that the Lord was actively touching people's lives, and he looked for ways to serve the purpose of God.

Is the word of God compelling enough to you to get you out of yourself? Do you believe the Spirit of God is at work in our generation, and that God has something going on with every person you meet or think about or know or speak to, and you can be part of it? These are the ways the fingers of God are making us who we ought to be, preparing us to receive what he wants to give us. The best things he gives, he can give only to people who are ready for them.

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