As I read my Bible and historical biographies, I sometimes wonder, “Have we truly progressed in our view of women using their gifts? Or, have there always been men and women who walked with God through the centuries and stepped out in faith, in spite of cultural restrictions?” They are the ones that become our heroes and heroines of faith.

How Boaz welcomed strangers

Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer from the Book of Ruth, is one of the examples I admire most. A man like Boaz must have been every widow’s dream. I am amazed to find him in the Old Testament, in a time and place where women did not have the rights and opportunities many women enjoy today.

In the ancient near east, a kinsman-redeemer is someone who took on the responsibility of redeeming a relative in crisis (see Lev. 25:25–55). Widowhood certainly qualified as a crisis for Boaz’s distant relative Naomi and her foreign daughter-in-law Ruth. But since there was a closer relative who could have redeemed them (Ruth 3:12), Boaz was not obligated to take on the added responsibility of supporting these women. He chose to welcome them anyway.

Where did Boaz learn to respect foreigners, women, and long lost relatives? The Book of Ruth does not mention any of his role models. Much of the Bible as we know it had not yet been written during his time. Perhaps he learned these things from the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), though many people in his context did not know how to read or write.

Let’s assume he would have been familiar with Scriptures which taught that people should not take advantage of the widow or orphan, because God “will certainly hear their cry” (Exod. 22:22–27). He might also have known the command, “Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge” (Deut. 24:17). Whether or not Boaz had access to these Scriptures through teachers or written texts, his treatment of Naomi and Ruth shows that he lived them out.

Why then do people in our day and age who have private copies of the Bible on their shelves with dozens more references to care, compassion, and respect for widows, fail to live out this message? For example, why would a couple write to a missionary widow whose family they have supported for seventeen years saying, “So sorry that Bob died, we always appreciated getting the prayer letters, etc.…This will be our last month of financial support”? This is only one of many similar examples my widowed friends have shared with me about their experiences.

Thus a man like Boaz steps out of the pages of Scripture to challenge me in new ways. First of all, he knew his servant girls well enough to recognize a new one among them (Ruth 2:5). When I was in nursing school we wore street clothes instead of our usual uniforms as an experiment to test how children on our pediatric ward would respond. We discovered the doctors didn’t recognize us. They had been giving orders and relating to “nurses in white” and they didn’t have a clue who we were as individuals. But being recognized as the unique person God created each of us to be resonates deeply in each one of our hearts, doesn’t it? When our name is called we look up.
Another thing about Boaz that stands out to me is that before he approaches Ruth for the first time, he informs the men of proper conduct toward her (Ruth 2:9). Having lived for more than 30 years in foreign countries, I marvel at his sensitivity toward her plight. How often do groups of men working together in the field or on the street hold one another accountable for how they treat foreign women in their midst? Here we see that as Boaz goes about his business he takes time to teach those around him about the God of the universe who cares for all people.

Table manners and more...

Boaz goes on to bless Ruth. “May you be richly rewarded by the Lord...under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (Ruth 2:12). Ruth’s heart hungered for a God who might care. At this stage in her widowhood she might have been vulnerable to any man and the security he could offer.

We have no idea if Ruth was beautiful or not. But Boaz connects with her by admiring her character on the basis of what he has heard about her (Ruth 2:11). He didn’t quiz her on her theology or doctrine, which she probably would have flunked at this point. He met her where she was; he knew she had chosen to accompany her mother-in-law to a strange land and was trying to provide for two desperate widows.

Boaz invites Ruth to come share in the meal. The table manners probably differed among their cultures. Did Ruth use the wrong fork? In any case, Boaz appears to have sensed the cultural incongruence, so after Ruth left the meal to continue gleaning, he again teaches his men how to be sensitive to foreigners (Ruth 2:15). “She doesn’t know all the rules, give her grace. In fact, pull out some extra grain to help her out, and in any case don’t rebuke her.” We rebuke people who are supposed to know better. Foreigners just don’t know, so give them time and help.

Boaz is generous, understanding, and sensitive; he is inviting but appropriate. Vulnerable in body and soul, Ruth could easily have reverted to whatever tricks she brought from Moab, flashing her long, dark eye lashes, smiling coyly, flirting with a glance. Did she tie up the uneaten roasted grain for Naomi with her skirt, raising it high enough for her ankle to show (Ruth 2:14, 18)? Every culture has its way of saying “I’m available” to the opposite sex.

However, the text seems to indicate none of this, in fact it says, “So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls...” and she continued living with her mother-in-law through the barley and wheat harvests (Ruth 2:23). She responded to Boaz’s kindness by expressing honest appreciation (Ruth 2:13). No playing games.

I suspect what attracted Boaz to Ruth was her hard-working, faithful, thankful self in the midst of overwhelming circumstances. These character traits have attracted many admirers through the centuries. So Ruth “got her man”! She is not a widow at the end of the story but a happy wife and mother. In fact, we’re told she becomes the ancestress of King David himself (Ruth 4:22).
But what about the other widow in this story: Naomi? How did she serve God without a man? The way so many people are prayed over and paired up, it seems as if we think single people can’t serve God. I admire the wonderful single women in our missions organization who decide to work full-time sharing Christ and discipling young believers. This is not culturally acceptable in many of the eastern European countries in which we work. Without a husband and children, a woman’s life is considered incomplete and insignificant.

I often hear this same attitude among American evangelicals, even though in 1869, the first woman licensed to preach in the United States was a widow who “hit the sawdust trail” for thirty years. Margaret Van Cott preached 400 sermons in one year, which resulted in 1700 people becoming members of the Methodist church. Her ministry has been likened to that of her contemporary, Dwight L. Moody (read her story in Daughters of the Church, by Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld).

Naomi and her husband decided to leave their home in Bethlehem because of a famine. They settled in Moab, where food was more plentiful and where their two sons found wives. However, within ten years, Naomi’s husband and sons died, leaving her and her two Moabite daughters-in-law without any means of support. Their tragic circumstances bring to mind Isaiah’s warning, “…these will overtake you in a moment, on a single day: loss of children and widowhood” (Isa. 47:9).

That is a common experience among widows I know: busy living life, planning for the future, dreaming, not expecting death to intervene. But it does; in a moment everything is different. When Naomi hears that the Lord has come to the aid of his people and asks the Lord to give them another husband where they could make a home for their hearts.

Separation was the only thing that made sense for three widows who had no means of support. One daughter-in-law kissed Naomi goodbye, but the other clung to her. Thus Naomi lets Ruth tag along, and accepts responsibility for providing for this foreigner. When God begins to move in Boaz and Ruth’s relationship, Naomi doesn’t pat herself on the back but says, “Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer” (Ruth 2:20).

Somewhere in her heart that was broken by the death of her husband, two sons, separation from a daughter-in-law, migration, famine, and poverty, this widow clung to the hope of a kinsman-redeemer. She paved the way for all of us who have our own stories of receiving redemption in Christ.

It seems our challenge is to respond with the compassion of Boaz to those in crisis, and to work with the courage and diligence of Ruth, while continuing, like Naomi, to ponder and pass along the story of our Redeemer. As we see from the examples of Ruth and Naomi, God works through widows in unexpected and redemptive ways. Like Boaz and the people of Bethlehem, may we stand out in history for welcoming them and working with them, respecting and learning from their broken but hopeful hearts.

Coralee and her husband, Ed, presently reside in Budapest, Hungary and have enjoyed traveling and teaching with Campus Crusade for Christ in Eastern and Western Europe for 33 years. They have five grown children and 11 grandchildren.