

The Book of Ruth - Act 2, Part 1

Last time we visited The Book of Ruth, we learned that it is a historical *story* centred around a Jewish woman, her Moabite daughter-in-law and a Jewish land owner who lived over three thousand years ago.

We saw how in the Bible stories God often seems hidden, even hostile. And there may be times when this is true in our lives. It might be that some of us are going through it right now. To such people, the story of Ruth acts as a comfort and an encouragement.

God does not always work in ways that we might expect, or desire, but he does work in and through our daily lives, and through the lives of the people around us.

The Book of Ruth was written to encourage us to see how God often works in unexpected ways, through the most unlikely people. Even people like you and me!

In the previous talk we learned that the Book of Ruth is an ancient historical story with links, some subtle, some not so subtle, to other Bible books.

And that it is carefully structured, using repetition, allusions (remember allusions? When something is like something else), names that have meaning, and words that rhyme and pun.

Chapter one of Ruth explained how after both have suffered the deaths of their husbands, Naomi and Ruth have travelled from Moab (Ruth's home country) to Bethlehem (Naomi's home town), where they have been greeted by a curious crowd.

We left them walking into Bethlehem, 'as the barley harvest was beginning', wondering what will happen next.

So, let's find out...

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz.

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, ‘Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour.’

Naomi said to her, ‘Go ahead, my daughter.’ So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.

Ruth 2:1-3

The opening paragraphs introduce a new character. Boaz.

Boaz is the central character in this part of the story.

His relationship to Naomi is mentioned twice (remember how repetition is used to emphasise and draw attention to things). This passage reveals two things about Boaz...

— He is a relative of Elimelek (Naomi’s dead husband)

— He is a ‘man of standing’

Israelites of this time were identified by their tribe, clan and extended household.

Family relationships were **so** much more important then than they are now; that was who you **were!**

Boaz is from Naomi’s husband’s clan, the Ephrathites (Ruth 1:3), a fact that is later revealed to be relevant to the story.

He is characterised as a ‘man of standing’, which more literally translated means ‘a mighty man of strength/power/ability/wealth.

It is a term that is mostly used for warriors, but can also be applied to people who are rich or especially good at something. We will have to wait for the next act to discover which of these best apply to Boaz.

Sandwiched between this introduction to Boaz, we see the relevance of the last words of chapter 1, ‘...the barley harvest was beginning’.

We are not told what happened after Naomi and Ruth entered Bethlehem, who they met, how they found a place to stay, or where they are now living.

As I said last time, unlike modern stories, Bible stories rarely supply details about the style of people's clothes, what the buildings look like, or give descriptions of people's facial expressions.

What we are told is that Ruth takes the initiative to make sure they have something to eat, by going out into the barley fields and picking up grain that has dropped to the ground when the workers have harvested the barley and bundled it into sheaves.

What Ruth is proposing is not a new idea, it was an established practice in the Ancient Near East, given a deeper, theological significance in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

Deuteronomy 24:19-22

Even reading through this quickly, some of you will have noticed the repetition of 'foreigner, fatherless, widow'. You can break the passage down into three sets of three phrases...

When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it.

Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.

*When you beat the olives from your trees,
do not go over the branches a second time.
Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.*

*When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard,
do not go over the vines again.
Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.*

Again we have repetition being used to emphasise, ‘when’, ‘don’t’, ‘leave’.

All of Israel’s staple crops, are to be shared with the the disadvantaged people who live amongst them.

Why?

Deuteronomy explains that the first reason reflects the pattern of many of the Old Testament laws.

‘so that the LORD your God may bless you in the work of your hands.’

God is saying that he has blessed Israel with crops, and that they are to imitate God’s generosity by sharing them with those less well off than themselves. If his people do right, he will do right by them.

The second reason is the one you will find echoed throughout the Bible.

*Remember that you were slaves in Egypt.
That is why I command you to do this.*

The Israelites were once slaves in Egypt, and God rescued them and brought them into a land of their own. As God has been generous to Israel when they were disadvantaged, so Israel should be generous to the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.

Naomi meets one of these criteria. Ruth meets at least two, possibly three.

As Christians, we have also been rescued from our separation from God and adopted into his family. And our response should be to show love, mercy and practical help to people who are on the fringes of society.

And so, back to the story.

Naomi agrees with the proposal and Ruth walks to a field where workers are harvesting the barley, and joins the other gleaners who are picking up the scraps that the harvesters leave behind.

And guess whose field it turns out to be?

Well, knock me down with a feather, or maybe a handful of barley chaff! It's none other than Naomi's relative, Boaz.

In the book of Ruth, there is little mention of God's direct interaction with the characters. There are no angelic visitations, or God appearing in visions or dreams.

However, as the writer Irene Hannon says,

"A coincidence is a small miracle in which God chooses to remain anonymous."

Too often we fail to see the way that God is working in our lives. Not through spectacular miracles, but in the 'coincidences' that we so often take for granted.

And so the story continues...

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, 'The LORD be with you!'

'The LORD bless you!' they answered.

Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, 'Who does that young woman belong to?'

The overseer replied, 'She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters." She came into the field and has remained here from morning until now, except for a short rest in the shelter.'

Ruth 2:4-7

As I've already mentioned, the Bible stories don't always give us the details we would like.

We are given no idea of what Ruth looked like. Was she attractive? Short? Tall? Elegant?

This is not because people's appearance is never mentioned in the Bible. Abraham's wife is described as being beautiful, as is Jacob's wife Rachel, who we are also told has a 'lovely figure'.

Nabal's (and later David's) wife Abigail is described as beautiful, and intelligent.

What we do know about Ruth is that she catches Boaz' attention. Maybe this is initially because she is a new face among the gleaners. However, we will soon discover that Boaz's interest in Ruth is more than merely managerial.

After his customary blessing to the farm workers, his first question to the overseer isn't about crop yields, or whether the workers are doing their jobs properly. It is about Ruth, and the question he asks is significant.

'Who does that young woman belong to?'

Not, 'Who is she?', but 'Who does she belong to?'

When people get married in the Old Testament, the partners 'take' one another and each then 'belongs' to the other.

This language was also applied to members of a household or an extended family. A child is taken into the family, and belongs to it.

Boaz is asking whose household Ruth is from. Is she single, or married. Whose daughter is she?

The overseer replies that she is the Moabite woman who recently arrived with Naomi. No man is mentioned, so this means she is single. He also lets Boaz know that Ruth is a proactive, hard working woman.

This is all music to Boaz's ears. And without so much as a 'see you later', he strides across the field to talk with Ruth.

So Boaz said to Ruth, 'My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.'

Ruth 2:8-9

This conversation between Boaz and Ruth (Ruth does get a word in eventually) seems straightforward in our translations, but is filled with allusions, puns and figures of speech.

Most are playful, even flirtatious, but some are there to draw our attention to the fact that this story is set in the context of the much bigger picture of Israel's history.

Boaz begins by putting Ruth at ease, making it clear that he is not here to tell her to get lost, and to give back the grain she's been gathering all day.

This would almost certainly have been Ruth's fear when she saw Boaz approaching, so you can imagine the deep relief she felt when he tells her she is welcome to stay.

Not only that, but he has warned the men harvesting the barley to keep their hands off her, and even to let her drink from their water jars.

This is a picture of a man doing all he can to make sure that Ruth stays close, is kept safe and knows that he is someone who can provide for her.

Boaz refers to Ruth as 'my daughter', which is a much more intimate term than would be expected when talking to a foreign gleaner.

The word that Boaz uses when he tells Ruth to stay with the other women gleaners is to *cling* to the women.

We saw this word used in Chapter 1, when Naomi urged her ‘daughters’ to return to Moab that Ruth ‘clings’ to Naomi and vows to stay with her?

As a listener, we are meant to detect Boaz unwittingly echoing these words as he asks ‘his daughter’ Ruth to glean only in his fields, to ‘cling’ to the women who work for him.

Boaz’ additional offer of water may seem like just the ‘icing on the cake’ of his desire to make sure Ruth knows she is welcome. But there is probably more to it than that.

Ruth is a Moabite, and her people had a chequered history with the Israelite people.

In the book of Deuteronomy we read...

No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, not even in the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you. However, the LORD your God would not listen to Balaam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loves you. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live.

Deuteronomy 23:3-6

Oops.

This passage will have loomed in the background to the original listeners from the moment Moab was mentioned in the opening sentence of the Book of Ruth.

As a result of this, the presupposition will be that Ruth will be one of the ‘bad guys’ in the story, and yet from the beginning she has been presented as being good.

Like Jesus’s story of the Good Samaritan, the Book of Ruth is challenging people’s biases and presuppositions.

One of the big questions that the Book of Ruth confronts is the question of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, in particular the historical enemies of the Jewish people.

The reasons given for the Moabites being cursed is that they didn't provide Israel with food and water, and that they paid the prophet Balaam to curse them.

And yet here we have Boaz, an *Israelite*, providing a *Moabite* with food and water, and protecting her from harm.

Boaz is reversing what the Moabites did.

And the Bible is filled with these 'reversings', where God's grace shines into our darkness, showing us that before law, there is love.

Ruth is overwhelmed by Boaz's kindness...

At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, 'Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me – a foreigner?'

Ruth 2:10

At first glance, her reaction seems a little 'over the top'. But in Ruth's culture, this would be an appropriate response to a superior's demonstration of generosity.

Also, when you think of all that Ruth has been through over the past few years of her life, and who is now living in Israel as a foreigner, having someone like Boaz treat her with respect must have been overwhelming.

And the rhetorical question 'Why have I found such favour in your eyes...', links back to earlier in the story where she asked Naomi to glean from anyone 'in whose eyes I find favour'.

Ruth is not sure why Boaz has shown her this favour, especially with her being a foreigner. She is probably worried that this might come with 'strings attached', although we are not told this.

What we do know is that Ruth has achieved her objective of obtaining food for her and Naomi.

And for the word nerds among you, the original Hebrew text uses a pun. The Hebrew words for ‘notice’ and ‘foreigner’ are both pronounced ‘nkr’.

‘Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice (nkr) me – a foreigner (nkr)?’

And so the story continues...

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. 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.’

Ruth 2:11-12

At this point the audience, especially the women, breathe a sigh of relief. Boaz has no dubious motives for helping Ruth. It turns out that Boaz has heard about how Ruth has looked after Naomi, even making the difficult decision to leave her homeland to live as a foreigner in Israel.

Boaz talks about Ruth’s virtues twice in the Book of Ruth. Here, and later in chapter 3. In each case he draws an analogy, a comparison, between Ruth and a famous Bible character.

On this occasion Boaz compares Ruth, a Moabite woman, to Abraham, one of the most revered men in the Old Testament. Once again we see the author of Ruth making allusions to other books of the Bible, in this case using similar themes and language to Genesis chapter 12,

Ruth 2:11 reads...

...how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before.

which echoes Genesis 12:1

The LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.'

While Ruth 2:12 reads...

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.'

echoing Genesis 15:1

*The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:
'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward'.*

Boaz is alluding to the first two promises made by God to Abraham.

Boaz is saying that Ruth, in leaving her homeland and travelling to Bethlehem is acting like Abraham who left Ur to travel to Canaan.

And Ruth did this without a divine promise of protection.

Ruth the Moabite, one of the 'enemies' of Israel, is here being portrayed as a fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that he is going to be made into a great nation, whose purpose will be to bless 'all peoples on earth'.

*I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;*

*I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.*

*I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;*

***and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.***

Genesis 12:2-3

As I said at the start, The Book of Ruth is all about the way God works through the most unlikely of situations. Abraham, a Chaldean idol-

worshipper (Joshua 24:2), is chosen by God to be the founder of a nation, Israel, which will provide the world with its saviour, Jesus.

What a wonderful encouragement that is to a small group of believers like us. We are part of the fulfilment of a promise made to a single man, thousands of years ago.

We may not always be able to see or understand it, but God wants to work in and through each one of us. And I know what you're thinking, because I think it too... 'What if God wants me to do something I really don't want to do?'

One of my regular prayers is, 'Lord, help me to want to do the things you want me to do'. God knows you better than you know yourself. He knows your darkest thoughts and still loves you. And he wants you to be more like the person he created you to be. That is what God's blessing means.

And God's blessings can come from the most unexpected places. Boaz recognises that Ruth the *Moabite* has blessed Naomi the *Israelite*.

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.

Ruth 2:11

And he continues with words that read like a prayer...

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.'

Ruth 2:11-12

But who is going to answer that prayer? God? Boaz? Both?

For that you'll have to wait until Act 2, Part 2.