

The Book of Ruth - Act 2, Part 2

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.’

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?’

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.’

‘May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord,’ she said. ‘You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant – though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.’

Ruth 2:8-13

The Book of Ruth is a 3000-year-old historical story centred around a Jewish woman, her Moabite daughter-in-law and a Jewish land owner.

One of the great values of Bible stories like these is that we see that the characters in the stories have similar needs, emotions and failings to ours, and that God works with people like ourselves to achieve his purposes in this world.

As a small congregation it is easy to think that we have been abandoned by God, that we are maybe too small to be of any significance.

The Book of Ruth shows us that God can work even through the most

desperate of circumstances, often in ways that we can only notice when we look back at what we've been through.

In the previous talk we saw Ruth taking the initiative to collect scraps of grain behind the local barley harvesters to obtain food for herself and her mother-in-law Naomi. We were introduced to Boaz, the owner of the field she is gleaning in, and told that he is a relative of Naomi's.

Boaz takes an immediate interest in Ruth, and the story uses allusions (when the writer wants something to remind you of something else) from other Bible books to challenge the hearers' preconceived ideas about God's attitudes to foreigners like Ruth.

We paused the story at the moment where Boaz has told Ruth that she is welcome to glean on his fields, and makes a prayer that Ruth will be blessed by the God that she has chosen to trust in.

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.'

'May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord,' she said. 'You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant – though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.'

Ruth 2:11-13

Ruth gratefully accepts his generosity, while still acknowledging that her status is less than one of Boaz's servants.

Her words are repeating the same ideas of her earlier question, but they now become a statement of thankfulness and hope.

As I've noted in earlier talks, Bible stories are carefully structured, often

using repetition to shape and frame their message.

The Book of Ruth has a thread of ‘finding’ running through the story. At the beginning of chapter 1, when Naomi is telling her widowed daughters-in-law to return to Moab, she prays that they will *find* husbands...

*May the LORD grant that each of you will **find** rest in the home of another husband.*

Ruth 1:9a

And in chapter 2, Ruth hopes she will *find* favour with a landowner...

*Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I **find** favour.*

Ruth 2:2b

And in today’s reading, we saw her questioning why she has *found* favour with Boaz,

*Why have I **found** such favour?*

Ruth 2:10b

and then thankfully hoping this favour will continue.

*May I continue to **find** favour in your eyes...*

Ruth 2:13a

The Book of Ruth starts tragically, Naomi has lost her country, lost her home, lost her husband and lost her sons. And from the way she speaks it is as if she has even lost her God, or, maybe worse, he has lost her.

And there are times in our lives when we can feel lost, as if we have been deserted by the God we have trusted in.

One of the Book of Ruth’s messages is that the God of the Bible is a God who seeks us and finds us. Who reaches out to us and saves us. It is a message central to the Bible, from Genesis to Jesus, God is a God who finds us when we are lost.

The New International Version's translation of this verse has her thanking Boaz for 'putting her at ease'.

*'May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord,' she said. **You have put me at ease** by speaking kindly to your servant – though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.'*

Ruth 2:13

The Hebrew word that the New International Version translates 'put me at ease' is used in other Bible passages, including when Jacob's family attempt to comfort him when he thinks that Joseph has been killed (*Genesis 37:35*).

It is also used when Joseph tells his brothers that he is not about to punish them for abandoning him in the desert (*Genesis 50:21*).

A more literal translation of Ruth 2:13 reads...

*'I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, for you **consolated me** and indeed you spoke to your maidservant's heart, even though I am not one of your maidservants.'*

Ruth 2:13

Ruth is here being comforted in her loss and assured of personal security.

And, more than this, we are being drawn into wondering if there might be more going on than just a landowner being kind to a foreign gleaner.

The following line 'indeed you spoke to your maidservant's heart' is politely grateful. Her fear that she might be turned away from gleaning has been changed into hope that her and Naomi will have food to eat for the coming months.

The listeners (that's you and me) are imagining what is going through Boaz and Ruth's minds.

Boaz has already referred to her as 'my daughter', and she has responded as 'his maidservant', even though she acknowledges that she does not

deserve this status.

What is going to happen next?

The story jumps to the workers' and gleaners' lunch break.

At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.' When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over.

Ruth 2:14

Boaz calls Ruth over from the gleaners' and invites her to eat with him and the harvesters. We are now sure that the intimacy between the two of them is growing.

Tongues will be wagging!

But once again, we're not given details of what is going on in either Ruth's or Boaz's minds.

As lunch ends, and work resumes, Boaz's generosity to Ruth continues...

As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, 'Let her gather among the sheaves and don't reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her.'

So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah.

Ruth 2:15-17

Having given Ruth permission to work with the gleaners and invited her to eat lunch with him, he now allows her to pick barley stalks directly from the sheaves, and even tells the workers to do that for her!

And having already warned the workers to keep their hands off her, he now tells them to make sure they don't boss her about!

You can see the eyebrows of the gleaners and workers rising! Why is Boaz favouring this foreigner? This *Moabite*?

By the end of the day Ruth has gathered a large quantity of barley heads. After threshing them, she has about an ephah of grain.

If you do a search for how much an ephah is, you'll find as many answers as Ruth had grains of barley. What we do know is that it's a generous amount. Ruth would have struggled to carry it back to where she was living.

She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough.

Her mother-in-law asked her, 'Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!'

Ruth 2:18-19a

And so Ruth returns to Naomi. Naomi is impressed with how much grain she has gathered, and curious to know where (and probably how) Ruth has managed to be so successful, and even provided with a bag of lunchtime leftovers.

For the first time in the story, we can see Naomi's mood lifting.

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.

'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 guardian-redeemers.'

Ruth 2:19b-20

And when Ruth tells her the name of the landowner, Naomi can hardly contain herself.

This rich, generous landowner who has obviously taken an interest in her Moabite daughter-in-law, is (as we, the listeners, have already been told) a close relative of Naomi's dead husband.

Which explains the line 'He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead'.

You can see the cogs spinning in Naomi's brain as she calls on the God she thought had deserted her to bless Boaz, as she realises that he has not turned his back on her and Ruth.

The 'lost/found' theme continues.

Ruth has found food for now, and a glimmer of hope for the future. Could Boaz be the husband for Ruth that Naomi has been praying that Ruth would *find*?

Naomi uses a strange term for Boaz, 'guardian-redeemer'.

She might be referring to a passage in Deuteronomy that we mentioned in our first talk on The Book of Ruth...

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her.

Deuteronomy 25:5

However, this doesn't seem to fit the current situation. We are not told that Boaz is the brother of Naomi's dead husband.

So what does it mean?

The Book of Leviticus has a law that covers what happens when someone has sold their property to pay off debts.

If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold.

This is a better fit with what Naomi is thinking about, especially when we notice that when Naomi calls Boaz a ‘close relative’ she uses the same words used in Leviticus 25. These are the only two places in the Bible where this occurs.

Remember how we’ve seen how the Bible stories often lack details that we might like to be included, here’s another example.

We are not told what happened, but Naomi’s dead husband Elimilek almost certainly sold his land before leaving Bethlehem for Moab. It is likely that Naomi is beginning to wonder whether Boaz could be the means by which she can get her home back.

- - - - -

Ruth continues telling Naomi about how well her day has gone...

Then Ruth the Moabite said, ‘He even said to me, “Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.”’

Ruth 2:21

And you can see the hope in Naomi’s eyes as she insists that Ruth stay as close to Boaz as she can!

Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, ‘It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else’s field you might be harmed.’

Ruth 2:22

The Book of Ruth, Act 2 closes with Ruth continuing to glean in Boaz’s fields...

So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

Ruth 2:23

This could have been the end of the story. Just add ‘and they all lived happily ever after’. But God has more (and better) in store for Ruth, Naomi and Boaz. Spoiler alert, by the time the story ends, we’ll see how Ruth’s family tree leads all the way to Jesus!

However, for now, nothing particularly exciting happens, just the normal patterns of working, eating, sleeping. Much like most of our lives. Much like most of the characters in the Bible’s lives.

Like most stories, the Bible stories describe the key moments in people’s lives, but there are long stretches of time when ‘nothing much happens’.

And remember, God wants to be present in every second of our lives, the boring, the exciting, the happy and the sad.

And when we do that, our lives become enriched,

- the boring becomes less boring,
- the exciting becomes filled with meaning and purpose,
- the happy times are enriched with gratitude and praise to God,
- the sad times comforted by his graceful presence.

- - - - -

And so we come to the end of Act 2.

Significantly, there no mention of what Boaz is up to, either coming forward to buy Elimilek’s land, or pursuing a relationship with Ruth.

Is he too busy working? Or just dithering?

I can hear the female listeners whispering ‘typical man’ under their breath.

In the next talk, Naomi attempts to move the story forward, and Ruth once again impresses us with her resourcefulness.