

Ruth: Kindness Unceasing

Ruth 2:1-23

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We left off in the Book of Ruth with Naomi returning from Moab, battered, bitter, and bereaved – having suffered the loss of her husband and 2 sons. She states publicly that the Lord’s hand has gone out against her. I left full, she said, and the Lord brought me back empty. Of course, she was not quite as empty as she thought. She had Ruth and, more, she had the God who Ruth swore to serve.

At the end of chapter 1, the text showed us a first ray of light. For the Lord had visited the land, and Naomi and Ruth returned at the Barley harvest. Perhaps now, the land having moved from famine to harvest – Naomi herself – may move from emptiness back toward fulness. We will make three points. Ruth’s gleaning in verses 1-3, Boaz’s generosity in verses 4-17, and Naomi’s gratitude in verses 18-23.

I. Ruth’s Gleaning

First, then, Ruth’s Gleaning. In chapter 2, verse 1: the narrator, who always knows more than the characters, tells us a secret. It’s something Naomi had forgotten and, strictly speaking, its redundant. We would learn about it in due time. But the narrator wants to tell us to keep an eye on the man he introduces here. He is already beginning to teach us that there is a divine superintending, a providence working for our good, even in and through what is humanly bleak – even incomprehensible.

Naomi had a RELATIVE, we’re told, on her husband’s side. A kinsman. And a kinsman, could (they were not obligated to), but they could, redeem (thus, kinsman-redeemer) deceased man’s family out of debt or slavery. And this kinsman, we are told was a man of standing. Standing means substance. That is, Boaz, is a man of wealth, a man of some means.

So, notice: this one is not only qualified by blood, to be a kinsman-redeemer, he is able, he has the resources, to redeem. And we will come to see, that he has the character to undertake the task willingly. But this is just an introductory note, a foretaste from the narrator.

In v. 2 Ruth the Moabite says to Naomi: Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain. That is, she wants to glean what is left-over after the harvesters do their work. Israel's God, in his tender compassion for the poor, the widow, and the stranger – and Ruth is all three of these – provided in his law for the subsistence of the poor.

Lev. 19:9-10: When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.

Now, this still required very hard labor (workfare). So, Ruth – rolls up her sleeves – takes initiative – forceful determined woman (pledge to Naomi) – it was hard work, and it could be dangerous work. Even though it was law: there could be unscrupulous landowners, trying to maximize profit. They may resent or make life difficult for gleaners. Much less a single, vulnerable, foreign woman. Thus, Ruth says she'll pick up extra grain behind anyone *in whose eyes I find favor*. She realizes she needs grace. She will need to taste the human end of divine hesed or generosity.

Naomi, gives no advice or direction, for she doesn't know about Boaz apparently. She simply says: Go ahead my daughter So, Ruth goes out and begins gleaning. She acts as a provider – she isn't looking for one. And in the middle of v.3 we read: As it turns out, she was working in a field belonging to.... you guessed it....Boaz.

Have you ever said something was an accident, or a coincidence, only to be told be another, that there are no accidents or chance events in God's world? Well, next time you can tell them you are, in fact, speaking biblically. *As it turned out* here means, literally, her chance, chanced.

By the way, Jesus says basically the same thing in the parable of the Good Samaritan when he has "as it happened" a priest was going down the same road. So, the point here is not that God is not sovereign over every event, in fact, the narrator puts it this way to highlight that very fact. But the point is, TO US, not to God of course, but TO US, things often fall out in an inscrutable, apparently random, chance fashion.

But behind and in and through all of this seemingly coincidental stuff – in the "it just so happened" stuff - the God for whom, a sparrow does not fall apart from his will, is at work. The providential God, whose hand had struck Naomi, is still working, even when he seems silent, through the most ordinary of tasks and human events. That is something this text calls you and I to believe. God's providence is governing your life – and governing it for good – even when it appears he's against you, when all you can see is darkness and death...

Especially in the things and people and events where you find yourself saying: how can God be in this?

As it turns out the story (any story) isn't finished until the God who governs all things, finishes weaving and working through the ordinary means of daily life. Mundane and random as they might appear.

II. Boaz's Generosity

Our second point is Boaz's generosity. Verse 4: another happy coincidence. Just then – of course, just at the right time, Boaz arrives at his field. And he greets his harvesters with: The Lord be with you! And they reply: The Lord bless you! In the light of the rest of the chapter, we can say that this is not a pious platitude. This is a godly man. And he's godly on Monday morning in the fields (talks to his staff). A lot of businessmen can be pretty good on Sunday. Boaz seems like a manager whose cares about his employees, and they seem to have an affection for him. Already, he seems like the type of man who spreads blessing around.

He notices right away that there is a woman he doesn't recognize in the fields. He asks his foreman about her, and the foreman fills Boaz in - she's the Moabite who came back from Moab. We learn a few things about Ruth here: she's courteous and polite. She's not presumptuous. She said (v.7): *Please* let me glean and gather. She doesn't say "I have a right according to the Torah to glean." She's respectful. She's the opposite of our modern sense of entitlement.

You can see this again down in v. 10, after Boaz speaks to her. She bows down, she says "why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me, a foreigner." The same self-effacing spirit is seen in v.13 where she speaks of not having the standing of one of his servants. There's a humility, a respect for custom, a lowliness from which gratitude springs. A meekness which inherits the earth.

Notice, she sees in the law (those who administer it), favor, or grace. She's appreciative of every small thing – she's the opposite of a grumbler or complainer. And she's diligent and persistent. Except for a short rest, she's been working in the field from morning. Her work ethic is impressive. And it seems clear that Boaz is duly impressed. The two of them (B&R) have a lengthy conversation beginning in v.8. He speaks affectionately to her. He calls her "my daughter." It's clear that he's not xenophobic. He's not worried about her Moabite outsider status. And he is generous. He provides for her. Don't go and glean in another field – don't go away from here. Stay with the women who work for me.

It's remarkable for him to include Ruth with his Israelite women, no questions asked. And whenever she's thirsty, she can drink from the jars the men have filled. She's not pressed into serving the men, she shares in their provisions.

Boaz also protects her. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you (modern men in power). This was the time of the judges, and there was a lot of moral corruption. But Boaz takes precautions for her safety and purity. She's vulnerable because of her gender and her nationality, so Boaz has a talk with his male harvesters, and warns them not to lay a hand on her.

This is a man who is not thinking of maximizing profit. He doesn't obey the law in a calculation or a grudging fashion, just seeking to do the minimum the law requires (letter). Rather, he shows hesed, covenant love, kindness, a deep humaneness in the way he upholds the law.

In v.11 we learn that Ruth's pledge to Naomi has been made known by word of mouth. I've been told all about what you've done for your mother-in-law. How you left your father and mother and your homeland, and came to live with a people you did not know. This is Abrahamic faith, faith that launches out into the unknown, in deep submission to God's providence. The loyalty which she pledged requires courage and fortitude to be lived out. Pledges are easy – pilgrimages are hard.

Boaz continues by praying for the Lord's blessing on her: 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.

The key thing about this prayer is the Boaz sees a convert, not a foreign Moabite. She has sought refuge – protection, provision, restoration – under the wings of the God of Israel. This is a lovely image – the wings of God – it speaks of his tenderness, his nearness and intimacy with, his care for, his people.

Psalm 36: How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. *In Psalm 91, abiding in the shadow of the Almighty is being "covered with his wings."*

There is also something of the yearning heart of God in this image: Jesus wanted to gather Jerusalem as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

So, Boaz prays for this God, the God who chose Israel and brought her on eagle's wings to himself, to give Ruth rest, restoration, to reward her in his grace for her obedience and service to Naomi.

Here I want us to notice something. Boaz is already, and shall be, the main way God answers his prayer for Ruth. We should be alert to this dynamic, and willing to be the answers to things we ask God to do in the lives of others. We can be the divine hesed to one another and to the needy – and that is what Boaz is becoming here. He is becoming the answer to his own prayer.

At mealtime, beginning at v.14, he continues to show his extraordinary respect and generosity. He invites her to share some bread dipped in wine vinegar. She is eating with his harvesters and Boaz gives her roasted grain. She eats all she wanted and has some left over. Like Jesus feeding the 5000, Boaz, provides an over-abundance where there had been great want. Then, he orders his men to go well beyond the requirements of the law for Ruth. Let her gather among the sheaves and don't reprimand her. That is, she doesn't have to glean from only the edges of the field. In fact, he says, "pulls some stalks out from her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up." He is guaranteeing an abundant harvest – well beyond what was due to even a diligent gleaner.

So, after a long day in the fields, Ruth threshes the barely and ends up with an ephah, probably some 30 lbs. of grain for one day's work. Naomi who went away full and came back empty, is now being filled back up by the *hesed*, the kindness of God, through the labors of Ruth and the generosity of Boaz.

There are people here whom life has stripped barren. They were once full – they are closer to empty now. You can be the *hesed* of God by which they are filled back up. Open your eyes, pray, then, as the Lord's providence leads, seek to be the answer to your own prayers.

III. Naomi's Gratitude

Our third point is Naomi's gratitude. V. 18: Ruth carries this load of grain (strong, in addition) back to town. And Naomi sees how much she had gathered. Plus, Ruth brings out the extra grain she had left over from lunch. One can only imagine Naomi's facial reaction. This has clearly been an exceptional day. Ruth herself went out empty and has come back full to overflowing.

Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you! You see that? Bitter Naomi is pronouncing benedictions. And after she finds out that the man's name was Boaz – a piece of information that must have caused instant amazement and hope – she does it again. The Lord bless him, she says. The end of v.20 has Naomi saying what we knew, but no one else did, from v.1 onward: That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman (guardian)-redeemers.

This is also a pivotal moment for Naomi. In an instant, she realizes the Lord is at work in the bounty she and Ruth received, and through the one from whose hands they received it. You can almost see Naomi's bitterness begin evaporate, and turn to gratitude - in v.20 when she puts all this together, and says: The Lord bless him! He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead. Through Boaz, she realizes that the Lord, whose *hesed*, whose kindness, she was certain had ceased, whose hand she was sure was plotting her ruin, has indeed NOT stopped showing his kindness to her.

Indeed, he has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead. To her and Ruth, and to Elimelek, the dead man whose name and line and property now stand the very real possibility of being perpetuated. Here Naomi confesses the deep goodness of God. She sees his covenant fidelity which had been eclipsed in her grief, she sees his absolute loyalty, and his commitment to bring his good purposes to pass. And here Naomi's flagging faith revives. The Lord's kindness is indeed, she says, unceasing to the living and the dead.

One day, beloved, that's all its been. One day of God's goodness, flowing from him, through your Boaz-like generosity, or your Ruth-like labor – one day of hesed from the saints, can revive the wounded hearts of bitter, suffering, struggling people. God, Mary said, fills the empty poor with good things. He is doing that here through Boaz and Ruth, out of the fountain of his unceasing kindness.

And Ruth stays, we learn, in the fields of Boaz until the end of the harvests. The chapter ends with these words: And she lived with her mother in law. That sets up the future dynamic of the story for "she lived with her mother in law," means Ruth needs a husband.

Let me conclude: God the Father, out of his abundant hesed, his unceasing kindness, sent Jesus our kinsman-redeemer, the full One who became poor, that we, through his poverty, might be filled up. And this filling up, this reviving of hope, happens through Boaz's and Ruth's in the body of Christ, people willing to be labor in humility, people willing to show generosity, and be the instruments by which their own prayers are answered.

People whose kindness enables us to see, that even in the bitterest parts of our lives, God is plotting our eternal glory. As the prophet Jeremiah came to realize in the midst of his own bitter lamentations: The steadfast love, the hesed, the kindness of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness. Amen.

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