

Ruth: a story for today

Act 2: In the Fields of Boaz

Ruth 2:1-23

Last week we looked at the opening chapter, or act, of the story of Ruth. Act 1 takes place mostly on the road between somewhere in Moab and Bethlehem. We now turn to Act 2, which consists of three scenes.

The opening scene (2:1-3) introduces us to Boaz, a member of Naomi's husband's family. He was a man of some importance. The words used to describe him suggests he was a man of honour and integrity.

We noted last time that although from Naomi's point of view her story has a distinct downward slope, God had not forgotten her. The statement at the end of chapter 1 is not a random fact, but introduces the idea that God has a plan. 2:3 picks up from this point and there is more than a hint that this is a 'God moment'. With God things don't just happen and both the time of Naomi's return and the place where Ruth 'just happens' to glean are shown as evidence of God's *hesed* or loving kindness.

Gleaning, the practice of allowing the poor to collect the leftovers after the reapers had cleared a field, was a God-given means of meeting the basic needs of the poorest in society (see Deuteronomy 24:19-22). Although not universally practised, care for the widow, fatherless and foreigner (that is, those who had no-one to speak for them) was a duty imposed on God's people. As God had said to his people, 'You, above all others, know what it is like to be down-trodden. Make sure you don't step on others in your ambition to be rich and powerful.' Gleaning was a reminder that God's people were to use their resources for the benefit of others.

In scene 2 (2:4-17a) the story begins to heat up. Boaz, coming to his field, notices Ruth at work. There may be a derogatory tone in the overseer's reply to Boaz's question (2:5f). To him she is just another migrant worker of no consequence. But Boaz's treatment of Ruth goes beyond the requirements of the law. I am not going to try and second guess Boaz's motivation. It is easy to view these events through 21st century eyes and see all sorts of things that would not have occurred to others in previous generations. One thing is certain, however, Boaz is drawn to Ruth. He knows her story and is impressed by it. It is Ruth's *hesed* to Naomi that is Boaz's reason for showing loving kindness to Ruth. (2:11f).

The final scene in this act (2:17b-23) takes place between Naomi and Ruth. On seeing the results of Ruth's gleaning an idea occurs to Naomi. It is not clear if Naomi is talking about God or Boaz in 2:20 when she says, 'He has not stopped showing his kindness' Given her earlier bitterness toward God it is perhaps more likely she means Boaz. Certainly she sees Boaz as a way out of her predicament. The reason for Naomi's optimism is not some romantic notion so much as the practise of levirate marriage.

There is no modern equivalent to this custom in our culture. Indeed, we are more likely to look on this practice with distaste. It was a way of ensuring family inheritance, and that property, particularly land, stayed in the family. It laid on close male relatives the duty of taking childless widows into their home and giving them sons who would then inherit their mother's dead husband's name and property. It is a complicated matter, and no-one seems too sure about how it was applied. It quickly fell into disuse.

Given the strangeness of this part of the story and its unique background, is there anything we can learn from it that is relevant to today? I think two matters have something important to say to us. These are about doing *hesed* and about the sovereign hand of God.

The story tells of how Boaz and Ruth live lives of extraordinary character. They are examples of the way we ought to live, not simply in the realms of religious observance, but in ordinary everyday life.

'Religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.' (James 1:27)

Boaz does this in his treatment of Ruth just as Ruth shows *hesed* to Naomi. Naomi is weighed down by bitterness and depression. Her words in 1:21 ('I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty) must have stung Ruth, particularly after her declaration of commitment to Naomi. You or I might have walked away at this display of ingratitude, but not Ruth. But this is not a story of God blessing the deserving and downtrodden poor. It is about faithfulness and grace. Ruth's loyalty and love reflect God's. The surprise is that God reveals himself by means of a despised foreigner. By courting Ruth, Boaz opens himself to censure. Once again God shows up in the most unlikely of places and in the most unlikely of ways.

We have already noted that there is more going on in this story than meets the eye of Ruth, Boaz or Naomi. The story of Ruth is a story told at two levels. The characters do what they feel they must and ought. They behave according to their natures, whether that is loyal, honourable or bitter. We, on the other hand, see the hand of God. This is important to remember in a world that denies God's sovereignty. Events are seen as the result of the independent action and choices of free agents, or simply as random chance. That God is, in some way, in control is not something considered by most.

This story gives us a quite different picture. Even though they make their own choices, we are left with the impression that without God's sovereign care things would be vastly different. While we are called to live in accordance with God's word, it is only by God's covenant loyalty and grace, his *hesed*, that we are saved and sustained.

Amen

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