

Ruth: a story for today

Act 3: On the threshing floor

We have been looking at the story of Ruth as though it were a play. Act 1 mostly takes place on the road from Moab to Bethlehem. In act 2 the action moves to Boaz's fields. Now we come to act 3. This is again in three scenes: scene 1: Naomi's plan, scene 2: Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor, and scene 3: Naomi's plan evaluated.

Ruth 3:1-18

The story so far has gone to some length to help us understand the three main characters. Naomi, who it could be argued is the lead character in this play, is by her own admission empty and bitter. She feels let down, even abandoned, by God. She feels that she must do whatever is necessary, even putting her daughter-in-law in a potentially compromising situation, if she is to survive. Ruth is presented as the compassionate outsider who has committed herself to Naomi, her people and her God. She is a woman of noble character, a loving and dutiful daughter-in-law. And Boaz, a local, wealthy landowner, a close relative of Naomi's dead husband, who is known as an honourable man.

On hearing of Ruth's success at gleaning in Boaz's fields, Naomi formulates a plan of action. As plans go it is simple and fraught with possibilities for disaster and disgrace. Put at its most basic, Naomi tells Ruth she must place herself at Boaz's mercy, trusting in his reputation as a gentleman, and seek marriage. Up till now Ruth has worn the dress-markers of a widow. Naomi tells her to set these aside, wash, put on her make-up and best clothes and visit Boaz. Naomi's intention is that Ruth should remind Boaz of his status as kinsman-redeemer and offer herself in marriage. The best place and time for this is at the threshing floor after the harvest has been gathered. Boaz will stay the night to guard his crop and he will be in a good mood, following the evening meal.

Ruth does as she is asked. She dresses up, goes to the threshing floor and waits out of site until most of the workers have gone home, takes note of where Boaz is sleeping (it wouldn't do to make a mistake on this point), and goes and lays down close to him. What could possibly go wrong?

During the night, as expected, Boaz wakes up and is startled to find a woman with him. Of course, at this point his reputation is also on the line, and he too is in a delicate position. Gossip and inuendo will spread like wildfire. This part of the story is written in suggestive language to underline the sexually charged atmosphere these two find themselves in. We must imagine the conversation between Boaz and Ruth is carried out in hushed, probably urgent, whispers.

Boaz is amazed at the risk Ruth is willing to take in coming to him in this way. He does not see her as brazen or manipulative, but as a loyal, honourable woman, worthy of respect. More than that, he sees in Ruth someone with whom he would be

willing to share his future. This probably isn't love at first sight, after all, he has known Ruth over the whole harvest period, but here is something new. Careful to protect Ruth's reputation he gives her instructions and, in the early morning, sends her home to Naomi.

A new tension has been set up in the story. Boaz is not Ruth's nearest relative so he cannot simply claim the right of kinsman-redeemer and marry her. He must approach the other man and give him every opportunity to fulfil his role. Scene 3, back in Naomi's house, ends with a cliff-hanger worthy of Jane Austin: "Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today."

Now, you may have noticed that, apart from two formal expressions, God is not mentioned in this act. Yet we get the distinct impression that God is at work here. Through the lives and actions of these two honourable people God is working to fill and sooth the bitter emptiness of Naomi, bring honour to God's name and work out his sovereign purpose as he establishes a family that not only brings us King David but ultimately the Messiah. All this is worked out through Godly people acting in a Godly manner (even if one principle character is bitter and empty and feels abandoned by God).

Words like honour and integrity abound in this part of the story, but the real key is *hesed*. Several English translations are used for this word, including love, loyalty, mercy, kindness and loving-kindness, but the most used is 'steadfast love'. When used to describe God it goes to the foundational commitment God has made in covenant his people. This commitment goes far beyond even the best human 'steadfast love'; it not only meets human need for deliverance from various kinds of disaster, but it also overflows into forgiveness, as an ultimate expression of rescue from distress so that a relationship can be preserved.

When used of humans, as Ruth and Boaz, it expresses itself in a distinct Godly fashion. Never defined in the Old Testament, the new sets it out for us: *hesed* is seen in acts of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Ruth and Boaz manifest in their lives what Jesus later made a command: "Love each other as I have loved you." (John 15:12) In the life of Ruth and Boaz we see the real meaning of Godliness. The measure of a person's faith is not seen in how many miracles they can wrest from the hand of God, nor in purely outward conformity to religious or spiritual norms or practices. It is seen in a Godly life of honour and integrity. As Paul puts it in what could be a description of Ruth and Boaz, "*hesed* is patient, *hesed* is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. It does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. *Hesed* never fails." (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)