



Life After Tragedy

Ruth 2

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Today we carry on with the history book of Ruth. Every good story has love, tragedy, loss, restoration and happiness together at the end. Every one of us will have these elements in our life story. Let's look at Ruth chapter 2 to see how we can cooperate with God as we make the journey step by step.

Ruth and Naomi have arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. Picture Naomi, dragging her feet as she remembered the bright hope with which she and her husband Elimelech left to find a better place to live, when there was famine in the Promised Land.

Ruth, walking beside her, maybe had a more hopeful view, though widowed herself, and instead of seeking her own safety and wellbeing, she sets about ensuring the wellbeing of her mother-in-law. Ruth was a younger woman and perhaps a bit excited to see the Promised Land for the first time. She was a foreigner, but that did not stop her surrendering to God nor God accepting her. After a long journey, the two widows had not much cash, so Ruth decided to go out to work.

In the Levitical law, reapers were instructed to leave the edges of the fields they were reaping for the poor to gather food. This was part of God's method of social security, giving the poor the dignity of work for their provision and Ruth & Naomi certainly needed the help. However, human nature being what it is, there was no particular certainty of finding reapers who were willing to follow that particular law, so Ruth said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone who will let me do so."

This tells us that she did not have any particular place in mind. She deferred to her mother-in-law, from respect and love, and knowing that Naomi had a better grasp of normal life and customs in Israel. Remember that because this history is set in the times of the Judges, there was no king in Israel and each man did what was right in his own eyes.

God intended Israel to be a theocracy – a nation which submitted to God's rulership. But as is his habit, God did not force them to obey. This brings me to the observation that although God could impose his will on everyone, & has the power to do that, he chooses to limit himself. He allows humans to choose whom they will obey. So it was not a sure-fire thing that Ruth would find reapers who would let her pick up the leftover grain after they had made each sheaf or stack of grain. As it was then, so too with us and what impacts our life - not everything that people choose to do is God's will.

There was no job seekers' allowance in those days. Naomi's husband had land, but the family had left Israel at a time when fields were not producing crops so no planting had been done in the 10 years they were away. That land would have been filled with weeds.

Naomi gave Ruth the go-ahead, so off she went and found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz. He was a man of influence and standing in the community, and had a staff team. This day, he happened to come

by and there, following on behind his servant girls was a young woman whom he had never met. She caught his eye straight away and he made enquiries about her.

The information network was very efficient – he had already heard about this young woman – a foreigner, from Moab. That country was not on good terms with the Hebrew nation, but Boaz was not prejudiced by that. The foreman told him about what a diligent worker Ruth had been already and how politely she had asked to be permitted to glean behind them.

So Ruth and Boaz met, treating each other with great mutual respect. He called her “My daughter” and she, bowing down to the ground, called him “Sir.” Their situations were very different. Boaz was a wealthy man, known and respected in his community. Ruth was among the lowest, being a poor, widowed foreigner.

But she had inner qualities of courage, faithfulness and was a hard worker. She also had chosen to worship Yahweh, turning away from Chemosh, the false god of her country. Boaz honoured her for looking after her mother-in-law and for choosing to trust Yahweh, and blessed her. Listen to what he said: *“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.”*

Words have power. This blessing which Boaz spoke over Ruth had an amazing result but I won’t get into that part of the story yet. Wait until next week!

Boaz displayed extraordinary kindness and generosity to her. He knew about God’s law concerning the poor and he went above and beyond what was expected. Perhaps he respected Ruth’s extraordinary self-giving: leaving her entire comfort zone – friends, family, country, language, music, culture, religion & all that was familiar, to accompany and support Naomi.

Ruth is described as a Moabitess 3 times in this chapter and she describes herself as a foreigner in her conversation with Boaz. So she can’t have been expected to know about the details of Jewish custom that appears in verse 20.

When Ruth got home, Naomi mentioned that Boaz was a close relative, a “kinsman-redeemer.” This term is a bit of a mouthful! What does it mean? Well, in those days, there were duties that needed to be fulfilled by a near relative. If a man married, but died childless, his widow could be cared for by the nearest male relative. He was expected to take her as his wife, support her and raise up children to keep the dead man’s name and place in the Jewish nation intact.

So among a number of Elimilech’s relatives, there were a few who could have taken the responsibility under law, to make sure his name did not die out and his inheritance was kept intact. Now there was quite an age gap between Boaz and Ruth. He was kind to her by providing food and protection, but he did not expect Ruth to want to claim him as a potential husband because of the age difference. So for the months of wheat and barley harvest, he made sure she was safe and had enough food, out of the goodness of his heart, not expecting anything in return.

When she returned home that first night she was carrying a huge amount of grain. Most gleaners would only get to pick up an apron-full that had fallen from the sheaves of wheat stalks, but Boaz told his men to pull out a few stalks from each bundle as they went along. So she staggered home with the equivalent of an Alibaba basket on her back, full of grain! That was a very generous amount!

If that happened every day for wheat AND barley harvests, it would be more than subsistence-level living. It would mean they could store up food for the other 9 months of the year and also maybe trade some for necessities like clothes and shoes.



When we were in Tanzania, we noticed some grain stores that were like large flat, open bins for storing the dried maize cobs. (See picture) These full bins would be expected to last for a year. Maybe there was a grain store Naomi used something like that.

Now this story of gentle, gracious people is in the Bible for more than just teaching children good morals and behaviour. We can find Jesus in this book. How can I know that? Well, in Luke 24:27, Jesus opened the Scriptures to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection....

"beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

So as followers of Christ, we know that in the OT, in every book there is mention of the Messiah, whether explicit or hidden in picture language. Here, Boaz is a picture of Jesus is our kinsman-redeemer and Ruth a picture of you and me, who are the ones who have come to take refuge under the wings of the Lord, the God of Israel.

There are other reasons, too, why was this all written down. Why do we need to know that Ruth show such deep devotion to her mother-in-law and to the God of Israel? Why are we told, again and again that Ruth was a Moabites, that Naomi was her mother-in-law, that Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer?

I believe that God is the author of relationships. Before the world was created, before the stars came into being, God was more than just an all-powerful spirit with creative imagination.

He is the ultimate in right relationships – the Lord, the Righteousness God, the one who dwelt in love and was love. Love needs to have an object. We need to *know* that even if we are struggling with any human relationship, God is bigger than our difficulties and is the source of help. If anyone here has shopped in Countdown Whangaparaoa, God could hijack their jingle: "Trouble with relationships? We can help with that."

Ruth's challenges are our challenges, her griefs, our griefs, her model of submission and faithfulness, our pattern for relating. We all have failures and losses in relationships. Naomi who had gone out full, came home empty. Ruth, who entered her first marriage with such high hopes, had them totally dashed, ending up with no husband, no child and a dependant mother-in-law. Ruth shows us where to turn.

She somehow knew instinctively that to submit to God was the very best thing – remember when she said to Naomi in Chapter 1: "May the Lord deal with me... if I don't stick close to you"? Before she even got to the Promised Land, her attitude was right towards God. She knew that God was the one to whom she would answer for her actions.

Obedience is not a very popular word these days, but it is a key part of our relationship with God. I was amazed to notice yesterday a significant purpose of St Paul's service to God. He writes to the Christians in Rome, "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God." He goes on to say what he had done – signs and miracles through the power of the Spirit, but it was so that people would obey Yahweh.

Ruth could have just pursued her own good ideas, but she submitted them to Naomi first, and gained her agreement. She took refuge in the Lord, the God of Israel, not in the false God Chemosh of her birth-culture. And God showed His faithfulness by guiding her to the field of a kind man, related by marriage, and as the story unfolds we will see how crucial it was for Ruth to listen to God and obey those inner nudges to be in a certain place at a certain time.

So our patient endurance, our sticking at doing the right thing even though it seems unimportant, all this has significance. Ruth happened to find herself in Boaz's field... And blessing was heaped into her lap!

As we draw to a close, I invite you to join me in prayer regarding two main areas of this talk. If one applies to you, focus on that and let's bring it before the Lord in prayer.

Firstly, is there an area of your life where you need a kinsman-redeemer? Ask the Lord to show you where he is at work in your circumstances. Begin to thank him for every way in which he is protecting you and providing for you. Take a leaf out of Ruth's book and express your honour and thankfulness to God for the seen and unseen ways he is acting as your kinsman-redeemer.

It may be that he will not swoop in on a white horse, scoop you up and ride off into a glorious sunset, but live as if God were right there with you. Submit to Him and His ways in everything, whether other people can see you or not. That is the path to blessing. And focus on what he HAS done, not on what he hasn't done... yet.

Pray with me the last two verses of Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."

Secondly: If life seems to be on hold, or if there are more loose ends in your situation than you could shake a stick at, take the long view of things. This is not the end of the story. Ruth's story took a long time to unfold and there were probably many times where she could have sat down and camped, saying, "It's not fair!"

God knows what the end of your story is; he has known since the beginning how things would unfold. If you are in a tough place, tell yourself, "This is not the end of the story". Say it aloud after me: "This is **not** the end of the story." "This is **not** my forever place." That's the truth and the Lord promises, "I am with you." There's no better place to be than with the Lord.

Amen.