

Series Ruth

This Message #3

Scripture Ruth 1:22 - 2:23

We are well into the story of Ruth and Naomi. In chapter 2, Naomi made the decision to return to her home in Israel. She thought it best to release her daughters-in-law from their obligations to go with her, but in spite of the logical and obvious reasons she presented, Naomi was not able to convince Ruth to remain in Moab. Ruth, in very eloquent and emotional words, made it clear that she would be loyal to Naomi unto death, was willing to live as an alien among Naomi's people, and was willing to be under the authority of Naomi's God, the LORD of Israel. Ruth's determination had been so strong that Naomi ceased to argue with her, and so the two women had traveled on to the town of Bethlehem.

The low point in Naomi's life is at the end of chapter 1. She had gone away from Bethlehem full, but, as she said, "The LORD has brought me back empty." Although she was once again among her own people, she was desolate and destitute because the Almighty had made her life very bitter.

The next major segment of the story is chapter 2, but I am including the last verse of chapter 1 because it provides important contextual information.

Read Ruth 1:22 - 2:23

The women arrived back in Judah at the beginning of the barley harvest. The timing of the arrival of Naomi and Ruth was another evidence that the sovereign LORD was working behind the scenes to take care of them. God had used circumstances to redirect Naomi back to the place where restoration could happen. Naomi was able to look back over the previous ten years and recognize that the LORD was behind the chastening and misfortune in her life. However, she was not yet at the point where she could recognize that the LORD was drawing her back to Himself.

The barley harvest began the latter half of our month of April. Harvest time was the best time of year for indigent people to be in Israel. Tucked away in the provisions of the Law given to Moses were specific provisions for poor people. They were allowed to glean the grain dropped by the reapers during the harvesting process. God's instructions are repeated in several places, but in Deuteronomy we read, "When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands" (*Deuteronomy 24: 19*). Similar instructions applied to olive picking and grape harvest. Gleaning was part of God's Old Testament welfare program.

The LORD had brought to Naomi's attention the provisions He was making for His people in Israel, and He had helped the two women on their journey to Bethlehem, and He had brought them back at the perfect time so they would be able to obtain food to sustain themselves. And in chapter 2, the LORD continued to demonstrate His mercy and grace through circumstances. For example, in verse 3 it "turned out" that Ruth "found herself working" in a field belonging to a relative of Elimelech, the man who had been Naomi's husband.

When Ruth went to glean in the field, she was completely unaware of who the owner was and what role the man would play in her future. However, as "it turned out," the man who owned the field was qualified and responsible to be the protector / redeemer that Naomi needed. The words in verse 3 imply "coincidence" and "happenstance," but the reader understands that the LORD is orchestrating the restoration of Naomi.

We need to understand the responsibility of the kinsman-redeemer, because the outcome of this story depends on this person. The Hebrew word is "go'el." A "go'el" was a member of the family who had the duty to fulfill one or more of the following obligations: to buy back family land that had been sold (*Leviticus 25:25*), to redeem a family member who had become a slave (*Leviticus 25:47-49*), to avenge the death of a murdered relative (*Numbers 35:19-27; Deuteronomy 19:6, 12*), to look after the needs of family members who were poor and helpless (*Leviticus 25:35*), and to marry the childless widow of a deceased brother (*Deuteronomy 25:5-10*).

There were several ways a "kinsman-redeemer" could help Naomi. He could purchase back the land which had belonged to Elimelech's family; he could look after the needs of Naomi directly; and he could marry Ruth, the widow of the son of Elimelech's family, and thus become a member of Naomi's immediate family.

Associated with the duties of a “go’el” was levirate marriage, which we thought about last week when we studied chapter 1 verses 11-13. You will recall that the Old Testament law made provision for a widow who was childless. The law stated “If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, the widow’s brother shall marry her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel” (*Deuteronomy 25:5-6*).

Boaz was not a brother to Naomi’s sons, but, as a member of Elimelech’s family, he was eligible to serve as the “kinsman-redeemer.” In reality Boaz was under no legal obligation to serve as “kinsman-redeemer.” His commitment to Naomi and Ruth would be in the spirit of the law, rather than adherence to the letter of the law. Chapter 2 in the development of the story reveals how this eligible “kinsman-redeemer” gets connected with Naomi and Ruth. Chapter 3 will explain the steps that Boaz took to redeem Naomi and Ruth. Now that we understand the background and direction of the story, let’s go back and think about how the connection was made.

The first information we have about Boaz is in verse 1. He was “a man of standing,” a phrase which was commonly used to describe a person who was well-to-do, prominent, and distinguished. The phrase was also used of valiant warriors. This latter description might have been appropriate for Boaz because landowners sometimes had to defend their harvest fields from marauders and plunderers. Perhaps Boaz gained his reputation because he was one of those who valiantly and successfully protected his resources.

Verse 2 informs us that Ruth was willing to take on the material support of her mother-in-law. She requested permission of Naomi “to go into the fields to pick up (or glean) the leftover grain.” In doing this, Ruth was willing to involve herself in an activity that was sometimes hazardous for women who did not have a protector or guardian, which, of course, she did not as a widow and an alien. Ruth seemed to be aware of the hostile attitudes of landowners and field workers. As verse 2 indicates, she hoped to glean “behind anyone in whose eyes she could find favor.”

Naomi gave her permission, and, “as it turned out, Ruth found herself working in the field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.” From the standpoint of Ruth, this was coincidental, but it was not coincidental from God’s viewpoint.

In verse 4 we learn that Boaz came on the scene to see how the work was going. His greeting to the workers gives us a favorable insight into his character. He is gracious and cordial. Boaz was quick to notice that there was one person in the field that he could not identify, and he inquired about her from the foreman. It was possible that Boaz was aware of the return of Naomi and the woman who accompanied her, but he had not previously seen her. The foreman also told Boaz about Ruth's courteous request for permission to glean behind the harvesters. He described her as hard working.

I have witnessed the harvesting of grain in today's Middle East. The methods used by small farmers have not changed very much through the centuries. I watched as the stalks of grain were cut by men with hand sickles. Backbreaking, exhausting work. The handfuls of cut stalks would be raked together, picked up, and gathered into sheaves. The gathering was work sometimes done by women. The sheaves would be loaded on a donkey or cart and taken to a threshing area where the heads of grain would be loosened from the stalks and then the husks loosened from the heads of grain. The final step before bagging the grain was to separate the grain from the chaff. The workers would use winnowing shovels to toss the heads of grain into the air. The heavier heads would fall straight down while the chaff and bits of stalk would be blown away by the wind. Barley harvesting would continue for about three weeks, and then it would be time for wheat harvest.

Gleaners like Ruth would follow the workers who gathered the stalks into sheaves. They would pick up the scattered stalks that would be overlooked. Boaz was apparently impressed by the report of the foreman, and he approached Ruth with very specific instructions: she should glean only in his field; she should stay with his servant girls; she was given permission to drink from the water jars of the workers. He was also concerned about her safety, and gave orders to the men to not touch her.

Ruth's response was typical of behavior in the Ancient Near East. People of lesser status in life would bow with their foreheads to the ground in gratitude for special favors that were offered to them. Boaz' words would have been a great relief to her. She would have her needs met during her working hours, and she was assured of protection.

Boaz informed Ruth that he was aware of her kindness to Naomi. He knew that she was a widow, and that she had left her people. Although he had not recognized her when he had first arrived, he did know information about her. Boaz concluded this initial conversation by pronouncing a blessing on Ruth for her devotion and loyalty to Naomi and also for her willingness to live “under the wings” of “the LORD, the God of Israel.” This phrase, “under the wings,” was an idiom referring to protection and authority.

In her response, Ruth expressed her grateful appreciation for the favor bestowed on her. She was probably surprised that Boaz had spoken such comforting and kind words to her, since she did not have even the standing of his servant girls.

A later interaction between Boaz and Ruth occurred at the time of the mid-day meal. Boaz invited her to share in the provisions which were available — bread, wine vinegar, and roasted grain. Boaz even served her as she sat with the workers. His actions showed acceptance of Ruth in spite of the fact that she was a gentile alien.

After Ruth resumed her gleaning work, Boaz ordered his men to make Ruth’s work as easy as possible. They were not to embarrass, insult, or scold her. Moreover, they were to pull stalks from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up. Boaz’s instructions revealed that he was being generous beyond the requirements of the law, and indicated that he had a special interest in Ruth.

Ruth worked in the field until evening. Then she threshed the stalks she had gathered. She would have been able to do this by hand, beating the stalks on a rock or with a stick to loosen the heads of grain and then rubbing the grain in her hands to dislodge the chaff. The result of her day long effort was about 30 pounds of edible grain, an unusually large amount. Ruth had been a diligent worker, and, obviously, Boaz’s instructions to his workers had enabled her to gather much more than a typical gleaner. It is estimated that a person would consume between one and two pounds of grain per day, so Ruth had gathered enough to provide for Naomi and herself for a couple of weeks.

Naomi must have been amazed by what Ruth presented to her. A stream of words poured out — questions about where Ruth worked and a blessing on the person who had made Ruth's good fortune possible. And when the name of the benefactor was announced, there was another burst of joy from the mouth of Naomi. The nonchalant way in which Ruth mentioned Boaz's name indicates that she had no idea of the dramatic impact of her words. Prior to this time, she had not known that Boaz was a relative of her late father-in-law. The name of Boaz had come as a complete surprise to Naomi, and she immediately understood the implications.

Naomi also suddenly recognized that the LORD was showing His kindness to her. The word translated "kindness" is the Hebrew word "hesed," which we have thought about previously. The fact that there was someone to be a kinsman-redeemer was viewed as the "loving-kindness," "unfailing love," "compassion," and "mercy" of the LORD.

Verse 20 is the turning point in the story. Up until this point, Naomi had been without hope, a bitter, despondent, and empty woman. She had lost her faith in the good will of God toward her. She had thought of God as her foe. But suddenly, in the surprising news about Boaz, she saw proof that the LORD had not abandoned her, that He was not withholding His loving-kindness from her. There was renewed hope that her daughter-in-law's chance meeting with Boaz would be the prelude to a long-term solution to her problem.

The closing verse in the chapter indicates that Ruth was able to glean in the fields of Boaz throughout the harvest season. Barley and wheat harvests together continued for 6-7 weeks. Ruth was encouraged to stay with the workers of Boaz that entire time.

The story does not describe the relationship of Boaz and Ruth during the weeks of the harvest season, but if they had the interest in each other throughout that time that they had on the first day, they undoubtedly became well acquainted. The story enters a serious stage in chapter 3 with an appeal to Boaz to do his duties as the kinsman-redeemer. I don't want you to miss any of this heart-warming story of love and redemption. Tune in next week, same time, same station.

Some lessons to be learned from this story so far:

- *It is better to trust God in the midst of difficulties than to try to run away.
- *God disciplines His people in order to get them to move to a place of blessing.
- *God works through ordinary circumstances to achieve His purposes.
- *God faithfully takes care of our needs, sometimes in unexpected ways.