

## Talk: Simply Worship 22 September 2024

### Exploring the Book of Ruth – Boaz

*Read Ruth chapter 2.*

We come to the second in our series on the lovely Book of Ruth. And Ruth is a great book to read at Harvest time – today is our Harvest Festival, as the story is framed by the barley and wheat harvests of ancient Israel.

Last week, Linda introduced us to Naomi, the Jewish woman living in the Gentile kingdom of Moab, and the tragic story of how she lost her husband and two sons. So, she returned to Canaan, and wonderfully Ruth, though a Moabitess, a foreigner, insisted on coming with her, and becoming a worshipper of the God of Israel.

But without husbands, these two women were almost destitute; they had no means of regular income. But God's good Law made some provision. This is what Leviticus 19 says:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

So as the barley harvest was beginning, Ruth asks her mother-in-law for permission to go to the fields to glean, that is to gather the grains of barley left by the reapers on the basis of Leviticus 19. As used to be the case here, gathering in the harvest was labour intensive; many members of the village would help to bring in the yield. But young foreign women were vulnerable – not everyone was kind to foreigners and there was the risk of unwanted attention from the young men. The hope was that someone in the fields might show her favour.

Enter Boaz. Naomi's late husband Elimelech had a relative called Boaz. What do we know about him? Well, later in narrative we discover that he was an older man, not a young man. Second, he appears never to have married. Third, he was clearly a man of substance. Chapter 2, verse 1 describes him as 'a prominent, rich man'. He clearly had both status and wealth.

It seems that in ancient Israel, the land was not a collection of separate fields, each owned by someone different. Rather, there was a single field divided into strips. It so happened that Ruth was guided – by implication by God, to the strip that belonged to Boaz. Boaz came to his part of the field to see how the harvest was going and he noticed this new young woman. So, he made enquiry from his servant and was told that she had come from Moab with Naomi. And there's a touching reference in verse 7 of chapter 2 – the servant testified to just how hard Ruth was working – from first thing and all day without resting.

And we see Boaz's immediate care. He tells Ruth to stay in his strip of land, and to stick close to his young women. Moreover, he warned the young men not to trouble her. And he ensured that she could get the drinking water she needed in the baking sun. Ruth fell down before him and asked why he was being so kind to a foreigner. And Boaz responded that he knew of her loyalty and care for Naomi and that she had left her own land and people to care for her. And Boaz blessed her, asking that the Lord would reward her for her loving-kindness to Naomi. And there is that beautiful phrase in verse 12 – she has come under the Lord's wings for refuge. God is like a protecting mother bird extending his wings of grace, mercy and protection. Of course, Boaz was God's agent – he was reflecting divine *hesed* or loving-kindness to a stranger, a foreigner, a poor widow. And the benevolence did not stop there – Boaz gave her a meal (v. 14), gave her additional grain, and even allowed her to glean in the standing sheaves, instructing the young men to pull out barley from the sheaves for her– so that she was able to take home an ephah of barley, that is 40-50 pounds worth of grain, which could be used to eat and to sell and so provide an income. This is a symbol of the extravagance of grace. Naomi was amazed. 'Who was it that cared for you in this way', she asked. 'A man called Boaz', Ruth replied said. Ah, Boaz.

And Naomi burst into praise (v. 20). There is no doubt, this is the Lord's doing. And Naomi informed Ruth that Boaz was none other than a relative of her late husband Elimelech; he was a near kinsman. And so, Ruth was able to glean right through both the barley and the wheat harvests.

Now the word *near-kinsman* in verse 20 is the Hebrew word *go'el*. And this word is a technical term meaning 'someone with the right to redeem'. And this takes us to Deuteronomy 25. Here there is a law that if a married man dies but has no children, his brother was obligated to marry his brother's widow and so raise up children on behalf of his dead brother. Hence, the memory of the dead man and the plight of the

widow is redeemed. It's the law that the Sadducees quote to Jesus to ridicule the idea of resurrection. In Ruth we seem to have similar principle in mind. Naomi could see that Boaz, the near-kin of Elimelech, could marry Ruth and so raise up children for Naomi's late husband and sons.

*Read Ruth chapter 4. 1-12*

But there was a snag. Boaz revealed (chapter 3.12) that he was not what we would call the next of kin. There was a closer relative than him. And Boaz as a righteous man, had to follow due process. Now it seems that some of the field had belonged to Elimelech. To redeem it would mean buying it as well as agreeing to marry Ruth. It's likely that this nearer relative realized that he would have to pay out both for the field and then also have to provide for Ruth and any children. It was probably too big an ask. So, he declined, and so Boaz as the next nearest relative was able to become the *go'el*, the redeemer. He could redeem the strip of land and marry Ruth and so redeem all that had been lost through tragic death. And at our next Simply Worship we will see how that all worked out.

Another aspect that we will think about next time is that Boaz is a direct descendant of King David. And whenever we think of David, we also think of 'great David's greater Son', Jesus himself.

The Book of Ruth sets out principles that we see perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. Today we have thought of Boaz's loving-kindness, his *hesed*, his care and generosity; so that he was the human agent of the God who extends his wings of generosity, grace and mercy over all people, even the alien, the foreigner. Jesus is our *go'el*, the Redeemer, who 'paid the price' to redeem us from sin and death, a price we could never ever pay for ourselves. The Book of Ruth shows a divine principle that we see perfectly and wonderfully fulfilled in Jesus. 'Paying the price' is a metaphor. The New Testament never says to whom the price was paid. This reminds us that mustn't press metaphors further than they are intended. Paying the price is saying that God in Christ has done something for us that only he could do. We have a *go'el*, a redeemer. And he bought us by giving up his life for us. And for that we are so grateful, so thankful, so worshipful. God's *hesed*, his loving kindness, and overwhelming grace in Christ knows no bounds. Alleluia.