

The Book of Ruth

Under His Wings

Ruth 2:1-13

Ruth is a story of extraordinary grace given through ordinary means. For Naomi, hard times have led to tragedy, and tragedy to despair. Even as she returns home to the barley harvest, chapter one concludes with her confession of unbelief: “Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?” (1:21). But Ruth perseveres in faith and the story takes a huge turn as she seeks refuge under the wings of the Lord.

Summary of the Text

A new character enters, Boaz, a mighty man of strength who belongs to the family of Elimelech (v. 1). Ruth the Moabitess asks if she can go and glean heads of grain in the field of one from whom she might find favor. Naomi tells her daughter to go (v. 2). Ruth gleans after the reapers and happens to come upon the field belonging to Boaz (v. 3). Boaz apparently lives in Bethlehem but comes to check on his reapers, greeting them cordially, “The LORD be with you” and they bless him in return (v. 4). Boaz notices Ruth and asks his manager whose young woman she is, and he says she came back with Naomi from Moab (vv. 5-6). She asked to work and did so all morning with little rest (v. 7). Boaz asks Ruth to listen to him, not to leave but stay close with his young women (v. 8). He has commanded his young men to leave her alone and provided her with water which they have drawn (v. 9). She bows asking why she has found favor since she is a foreigner (v. 10). Boaz learned all about her care for Naomi since Elimelech’s death, leaving her parents in Moab to come as a stranger in Israel (v. 11). He blesses her saying the Lord will repay and reward her, the God of Israel under whose wings she has come for refuge (v. 12). Ruth receives this, calls him her lord, and appreciates his comfort and kindness for treating him like one of his maidservants even though she isn’t (v. 13).

From Outside to Inside

Ruth is about as far outside of God’s covenant people as one can get. She’s a Gentile, a Moabitess, a woman, a widow, and someone who was told not to come to Israel. The Gentiles were without God and without hope in the world, and a plague on Israel in the time of the judges. The Moabites refused to give bread and water when Israel passed through their land. Moabite women ensnared Israelite men into sexual immorality at Baal Peor (Num. 25). Many would have said Chilion got what he deserved for marrying a dirty Moabitess—death. Ruth clings to Yahweh and withstands Naomi’s objections, signing up for all the hardships she would face in Israel. Her first task will be to survive. The cost of discipleship is high and total. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Ruth literally might die, but she has already died to unbelief, to fear, to the idols and comforts of Moab. She comes ready to work and honor her mother-in-law. Through her the Lord reignites Naomi’s faith who calls her “my daughter” (v. 2). Boaz will receive, employ, and protect her. The great reversal for Ruth, Naomi, and Israel, even leading to King David, begins because a Moabitess would not let go. She is like Jacob wrestling God and refusing to let him go without a blessing, walking away blessed and with a limp. Ruth has come from far but now draws near.

Gleaning

The law of God commanded the practice of gleaning: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19:9-10; cf. Lev. 23:22). In Deuteronomy a reason is given for the command: “When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward; it

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shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this thing” (24:20-22). Israelites in the promise land, generations away from their fathers who died in the wilderness, were supposed to remember slavery and poverty. The poor, stranger, fatherless, and widow would then be welcomed to glean in their fields, that is, to do the hard work of harvesting by hand in order to eat. Jesus said, “The poor you will always have with you”, and Paul, “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). We care for those who can’t work, but those who can, must. Ruth works hard, and while she will receive unimaginable blessings, her willingness to work unto the Lord alone would have sustained her. There’s a contrast that comes through in the original between the field of Moab she came from and the field of Boaz she comes to now (1:6, 2:2). She seeks opportunity and takes it along with the risk when she gets the chance. The “chance” and “just so happened” (v. 3) is a nod to God’s good sovereignty. We see in the principle and practice of gleaning that God commends giving a personal, non-bureaucratic hand up, not a handout. Since you get more of what you subsidize and less of what you penalize, paying people not to work and not punishing crime explains why we have more of them. This is *the* systemic injustice that must be repented of.

The Mighty Man of Strength

Boaz means “strength.” Next to Jachin (“He will establish”) the pillar of the temple was named after him (1 Kgs. 7:21). Like the brothers from the church in Philadelphia whom Jesus will make pillars in the house of God when they overcome, we all want to be like Boaz (Rev. 3:12). He is an *ish gibor chayil*, a man of great strength (v. 1). This means might, wealth, and greatness, and we see Boaz employing enough reapers to have at least one manager. He greets them with a blessing and they bless him in return, and from this text comes the liturgical greeting, *Dominus vobiscum*, “The Lord be with you!”, “And also with you!” or “And with your spirit.” Boaz has means, wisdom, influence, and as we’ll find out, mojo. He knows his men and the state of his fields (Prov. 27:23) and is ready to be generous. He takes time to get the story and will follow up thoroughly to understand what needs to be done in the situation. He’s a relative of Elimelech’s, but not the closest one. Still, his strength abounds in kindness to Ruth, to Naomi, and in honor to God: “He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who honors Him has mercy on the needy” (Prov. 14:31). We learn in Matthew that Salmon begat Boaz by Rahab (Matt. 1:5). He was the son of a prostitute Gentile who was redeemed by trusting in the Lord. No wonder he was ready to show mercy to this foreign woman. He calls her “daughter” like Naomi (v. 8), reserves space in his field for her, commands his young men not to touch her, provides drinking water for that hot labor (v. 9), and blesses her whole endeavor (v. 13).

Wings of Refuge

Boaz uses this lovely metaphor, “a full reward be given you by Yahweh God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge” (v. 12). God is like a great eagle with wings that shelter and protect His young. To seek God’s refuge means you have to flee from something—from pride, guilt, shame, fear, from sin and death. Any reason is a good one to seek refuge under His wings. Not everyone does and Jesus wept over His rebellious city that would not gather under His protection (Lk. 19:41; Matt. 23:37). He is the mighty man who rescues all of the broken and takes in the stranger and the fatherless into His own house.