

### The romance of redemption (Part 3)

#### *Question to consider:*

I once saw 30 mustard seeds on the tip of a man's finger. If faith as small as one mustard seed is all that is needed (Matthew 17.20), what does this story teach us about putting our faith in our redeemer?

#### **Ruth 1.19-22 (NIV)**

<sup>19</sup> So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" <sup>20</sup> "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. <sup>21</sup> I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." <sup>22</sup> So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

#### v20 Don't call me Naomi

The name Naomi means "pleasant, lovely, and delightful" and Mara means "bitter in taste or experience". We always have a choice with hardship to either allow bitterness to take root like poison in our lives or to receive God's grace (Hebrews 12.15). We see this with Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2) who did not turn her back on God in bitterness, but cried out to him for help.

#### v21 I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty

Remember the story of the widow in 2 Kings 4 – all she had left was a little oil and empty vessels. Naomi had lost her husband, both her sons, and one daughter-in-law. She had lost all kinds of material possessions. All she had left was one daughter-in-law, Ruth. But through that one thing she had left, God was going to bring unbelievable blessing into her life.

#### v22 as the barley harvest was beginning

Barley was the first of the grain crops to be harvested each year, beginning in March or April. The barley harvest took two months, from March/April to May, each year.

#### **Think about Ruth's situation**

- She was a widow.
- She appeared to be barren, given that she had been married 10 years with no children. Perhaps she could not have children? That would have made her an unattractive marriage prospect.
- She was a Moabite and intermarrying with Moabites was condemned (Numbers 25.1-5). So no Jewish man in Bethlehem would be interested in pursuing marriage. And there would be very few foreign men living there, because in conquering the land the Jews had killed most of the former inhabitants, and this story took place early in the period when the Judges ruled, so there would not have been much time for foreigners to come and settle in this region.

- She was poor. She and Naomi had travelled from Moab to Bethlehem. This was a hazardous 7-10 day journey for the two women on their own, during which they would have discussed how they were going to survive in Bethlehem. As soon as they arrived Ruth immediately went into the fields to collect the left-overs of the harvesters. That does not suggest that they arrived with lots of money. Quite the opposite.
- Jewish marriage customs changed over time and could be different between different Jewish communities. So it's hard to know what the customs were for Ruth's time in Moab and in Bethlehem. Two separate acts were involved: the engagement and the marriage. The engagement took place before witnesses (we see this in Ruth 4.9-11). The two ceremonies usually took place up to a year apart. In Genesis 24 we see this in the engagement of Isaac and Rebekah. For Ruth to have been married 10 years, means she may have been engaged up to one year before that. Girls were often married soon after reaching puberty, so too boys, although for boys it could also be a little later. Assuming Ruth got engaged at 13 or 14, she would be 24 or 25 at this stage.
- She was quite vulnerable to being raped/molested. She began work at dawn, in fields with male harvesters, a foreigner, widow, poor. We see this vulnerability when Boaz tells her to stick close to his female servants (2.8) and that he commanded his male servants not to touch her (2.9), and clearly both women were aware of this danger, as seen when Naomi (2.22) says "in someone else's field you might be harmed".
- Ruth had a very limited experience of God. She had a husband who had disobeyed God by marrying her, and for the 10 years they were married she continued to worship her Moabite gods (idols). She had a mother-in-law who was bitter toward God. Remember in 1.15 Orpah was going back to her gods and Naomi told Ruth to do the same.
- She was socially isolated. Other than Naomi, she had no one. A childless, foreign widow. Even the lowest Israeli servant was above her in standing. On the journey into Israel and whilst working in the fields, she would have experienced poor treatment from everyone. Yet from the moment he meets her, Boaz treats her with value and respect.

### **The day the romance begins**

In the first five verses of the book, ten years whiz by. In Chapter 1 a famine started and ended, a family migrated, two marriages were made, and three men died. But in 2.1-22 we just have a one day period. For 3,400 years people have been blessed by reading what took place on this particular day when Ruth and Boaz began their relationship.

### **Ruth 2.1-3 (NIV)**

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz. <sup>2</sup> And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." <sup>3</sup> So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.

v1 a relative

The word used here is not kinsman-redeemer, but the word for a close, intimately known relative. If Naomi knew she had a close relative who was well off, why didn't she seek his help upon her return? Perhaps 1.20 and Hebrews 12.15 have the answer. When bitterness takes root in our lives, it poisons relationships.

v1 a man of standing

Elimelek and Naomi had not trusted God to provide for them in the promised land. They had not believed the Deuteronomy 11.13-17 promise that if they were obedient, God would bless them. They turned their backs on God and went the wrong way. But during the time of famine Boaz and others had stayed behind, and trusted God. Naomi and her family made a choice in a hard time, a time of famine. But they didn't have to make the wrong choice they did. The people of Bethlehem had not perished from hunger. They were still there. And they were blessed more than Naomi's family. Sometimes we justify wrong choices because of difficult circumstances. The expression rendered in the NIV as 'a man of standing' is elsewhere (eg Judges 11.1) rendered as 'a mighty man of valour'. It means that he possessed the finest of qualities. Boaz had remained faithful even in the tough times and God had blessed him.

v2 "Let me go ..."

The character of Ruth is seen in her initiative to care for her mother-in-law. Naomi does not command Ruth to work. Ruth says, "Let me go ..." Ruth has committed herself to Naomi with amazing devotion and she takes the initiative to work and provide for her.

v2 pick up the leftover grain

### **Leviticus 19.9-10**

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. <sup>10</sup> Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner.

Leviticus 19.9-10 commanded farmers in Israel that they should not completely harvest their fields. They were commanded to "cut corners" in harvesting, and always leave some behind. Also, if they happened to drop a bundle of grain, they were commanded to leave it on the ground and not pick it up. This was one of the social assistance programs in Israel. Farmers were not to completely harvest their fields, so the poor and foreigners could come and glean the remains for themselves. It was a way of helping the poor. It commanded the farmers to have a generous heart, and it commanded the poor to be active and to work for their food. It gave the poor and foreigners a way to provide for their own needs with dignity.

v2-3 "Go ahead, my daughter." <sup>3</sup> So she went out ... As it turned out,

Recall Proverbs 16.9 (NLT): "We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps." Ruth put her faith in God (1.16). Naomi and Ruth planned for Ruth to go into the fields and God led her to a very particular field. To her it was no different from any other, but God was protecting Ruth, and blessing her and Naomi. Naomi doesn't know where Ruth goes and Ruth doesn't know where she is. She *happened* to come to the part of the field belonging to

Boaz – that is how it seemed to her. But it was not how it actually came to pass. Ruth came to that field because God was guiding her. We saw this in 1.22 as well – Naomi and Ruth planned to return to Bethlehem, and God directed their steps so that they arrived “as the barley harvest was beginning”.

### **Ruth 2.4-7 (NKJV)**

Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said to the reapers, “The Lord be with you!” And they answered him, “The Lord bless you!” <sup>5</sup> Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, “Whose young woman is this?” <sup>6</sup> So the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered and said, “It is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. <sup>7</sup> And she said, ‘Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.’ So she came and has continued from morning until now, though she rested a little in the house.”

v4 “The Lord be with you!”

This shows us something of the heart and character of Boaz. He had a good relationship with his workers. You can often tell the real character of a man in authority by seeing how he relates to his staff and by how they think of him. In v1 we saw that he was a man of standing, but here, more importantly, we see that he was a man of God; why else would this greeting be recorded? That this wasn’t just a pious greeting, but a genuine attitude is seen in the next verses, in the way he interacts with the lowest of the low, a poor, foreign widow.

v5-6 Boaz and Ruth were introduced by an unnamed servant

The unnamed servant is symbolic of the Holy Spirit, who “will not speak of himself” (John 16.13), but instead, “the Helper ... will testify of Me” (John 15.26).

- Remember in Revelation 5 our redeemer is Jesus “the lamb”. The role of the Holy Spirit (Revelation 21.9) is to bring the bride and groom together “Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife”.
- Boaz and Ruth’s meeting was not random, but arranged by the Holy Spirit. It was part of God’s plan of redemption.
- In Genesis 24 is a beautiful picture of Abraham as God the Father, Isaac as the Son of the Father, and the unnamed servant as the Holy Spirit, bringing the bride to the son.
- Although we know Abraham’s senior servant was Eliezer, meaning “God is his help” (Genesis 15.2), he is not named in the story where Rebekah and Isaac are introduced to each other, in which he takes a central role (Genesis 24). He is not a menial servant but rather Abraham’s right hand man, the one who’s in charge of all that he owns and of all his affairs. He is loyal, devoted, skilled, and powerful.
- Abraham, whose name means “Father,” charged his servant with the task of finding a wife for his son, Isaac. When the servant arrived at the well of Haran, he prayed that God would reveal the right woman by way of a test of selflessness – that is also what impresses Boaz’s unnamed servant about Ruth.

v7 And she said, ‘Please let me glean and gather ...’

As we saw in v2, so here again this shows us something of the heart and character of Ruth. The servant reported her humble attitude. She doesn't presume or demand her right to glean (Leviticus 19.9-10). Instead she kindly asked for the right to gather in his field. Although Ruth was a woman who took initiative (v2), she was not pushy or presumptuous but humble (v7).

### **Think about Boaz's situation**

- He was a half-breed, the son of a Jewish father and foreign mother. I am one too. I am half German and half Indian, and was a German citizen when I came to Australia. In primary school I would often get beaten up, with teachers looking on. They would break up other fights, but not these. They probably thought I was getting my just deserts. After all, to them, I was a Nazi. To Australians back then all Germans were Nazis and the enemy. The fact that my mother was born at the beginning of the war and her father was a policeman, not a soldier, nor a member of the Nazi political party, had nothing to do with anything. Similarly, as Israel conquered the promised land and subjugated the inhabitants, killing most of them, there would have been little sympathy for the half-breed, Boaz. Kids can be cruel. Can you imagine the taunts? Not only was his mother a foreigner, but she had been a prostitute.
- We don't know why he wasn't married when he met Ruth. He was clearly older than her. It's possible he had been married. Or perhaps, although rich, being a half-breed the local women were not interested in having children who would not be completely Jewish.
- Ruth 2.1 He was a relative of Elimelek and Naomi, and 1.12 Naomi was too old to have more children; 2.8 he called Ruth 'daughter'; 3.10 he said she had not sought young men. It suggests he was older than Ruth, but how much older we cannot tell. He may have been aged anywhere from his mid-30s to his late 40s. I am friends with one of my mother's cousins. Although cousins, they are not of similar age. My mother is the daughter of the eldest son, and her cousin is the son of the youngest daughter. His mother and my mother's father were brother and sister. So even though he is from my mother's generation, he is actually much closer in age to me, than to my mother. Similarly in those days people had large families. All we know for sure is that he was older than Ruth.
- Jericho's walls came down. Only his mother and those in her house were saved. Imagine her with little Boaz on her knee, telling him stories of Jericho and its destruction – exciting for a young boy.
- Rahab would have had an understanding of the grace of God. She was saved because she rescued two spies in Jericho. Even though she was a prostitute, God chose to rescue her when the city was invaded. Boaz grew up in a household where the love and grace of God had been experienced firsthand. The stories of God's mercy on his foreigner mother would have been passed on to Boaz and may have influenced his feelings about Ruth.
- If any man was going to be sympathetic to the needs of a foreign woman in that community, it would be the son of a foreign woman.

- Think too about Rahab's profession. She had been a prostitute, in other words, a woman of "disrepute". Ruth, in contrast, was a woman whose dedication to Naomi and whose good character were the talk of the town (3.11). That might have had particular appeal to Boaz.

The connection to Abraham, seen with the unnamed servant, is reinforced later in Ruth.  
Romans 4.16 (NKJV):

Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.