



"Grandad Boaz, how did you get engaged? Did you ask her first?"

... Grandad, "well, it wasn't exactly like that..."

"Was it all romantic with candles and the sunset, where you held hands and ... "

"Well actually it was night time, yes, after the harvest, yes, and actually me and the men had all been celebrating provision with good food and good wine, and I went to sleep at the floor where we thresh the grain, I didn't want to go home, and then in the middle of the night, I woke up, I didn't know who was there, but then I realised it was your granny was there, and she asked me to marry her! "

We see in these stories, how Naomi moves from pain, suffering, bitterness, towards joy and healing towards others and towards God. I feel the name - Ruth - helps us miss what is going on with Naomi - how she begins the story in pain, how she ends in joy.

Yet three of the four chapters are both a relationship that starts with " as it turned out" moment in the fields, through to engagement, marriage and the first child, Obed. We see God's hand in the scenes not only bringing provision and healing to Naomi but also in two people coming together.

To become very practical again. For our married couples here, how did God bring the two of you together? Do you think he did? What story can you tell? Maybe you often share about the practicalities and events that were around it. But how was *God* at work? I'd suggest, this is something to share with your godchildren or children. Not only to tell the practical story, like

Jesse asked - but to also share how, looking back, God was at work in all of this.

You see for our children and godchildren, it is important to share our lived experience of God, how the theology and teachings of this great Book, have been expressed in our lives. We may have shared stories with them about His guidance, His provision, His comfort with our children or godchildren. But have we shared with our children or godchildren about how it all began for us as a couple and what "as it turned out" moments there were?

Of course, those are also wonderful stories over coffee after church for us to share as a community - not only does it help us get to know each other, and grow in our understanding of God's ways, there are usually often humorous moments!

So focusing in upon Ruth chapter 3.

Ruth 1 - 10 years, Ruth 2, 24 hours, Ruth 3 - the main events, just over a few hours...

"Naomi, having come back to life, now takes charge, as Ruth did at the start of chapter 2." (Word Biblical Commentary, *Ruth*). Her focus is upon provision for Ruth. A home, husband, security. The harvest has come to an end - seven weeks have elapsed between Ruth 2 and this chapter. From what Naomi does, it says that they are still vulnerable as widows. The community have not provided nor have the close relatives acted.

Boaz will be winnowing. That involves throwing the grain straw chaff up with a winnowing fork, and as long as the wind is not too strong, the heaviest grains are all that falls on the threshing floor - the grains. Best time for winnowing is in evening when winds are the right strength, so the grain doesn't get blown away

with the straw. The separation of grain from everything else - John the Baptist uses this image to describe the work of the Messiah.

Ruth isn't to rush into this meeting with Boaz. She is to wait until it is dark, and to take note of where he lies down to sleep. She is to uncover his feet - he is wrapped up in his cloak etc - and lie down beside or near his feet.

Why do it in such a way - at night? In what sounds questionable? In fact at the end, Boaz says she needs to leave before dawn, so "no one must know a woman came to the threshing floor."

Well, it is likely that as the owner, a wealthy person, he was sleeping further away from the workers. So he is by himself or far enough away for a private conversation. This is direct. One on One.

Also. Boaz is clearly older than Ruth - he mentions that she could have gone after the younger men. He may have thought - if he approached Ruth about marriage - she would not be interested due to the age profile. So he will not approach her.

Also as a kinsman, he is far enough away, socially, that there is no social pressure to act beyond his generosity so far, and it may not even have occurred to him to act further towards Ruth or to help Naomi.

Boaz is unlikely to take initiative.

Ruth is to wait until he has finished eating and drinking. Considering the character of Boaz shown so far - rather than reading movies or our imaginations into it - it is not suggesting

he is drunk, and a lady takes advantage of him and he wakes up with a hangover and wonders what happened! No, Boaz is honourable. Ruth is too, the book shows us. Food and drink - relaxed, the work is done, an enjoyable evening. He is in a good place to talk with.

Now, Ruth is told to get ready. The NIV text puts it one way - 'bathe, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes'. It maybe suggests a night out. Not the best translation. Hebrew says - 'bathe, put on perfumed oil and a change of clothing.' Commentators try to work out what is going on. But a direct parallel is 2 Samuel 12:20 - David learns of the death of his son born to Bathsheba, "he washed himself, put on perfumed oil and changed his clothing.." In mourning - you did not bathe, or anoint with oil and you wore clothes of widowhood. The suggestion is to Ruth - to end her time of mourning for her husband. To return to normal activities and desires of life which would include marriage. Naomi releases her from the actions of being a widow, permits her to marry. And also by such a change of clothing, smell, sight, it would indicate to Boaz that she was open to marrying, and she was serious when she would speak to him.

*So it is dark.* It all sounds like a very odd plan. Naomi believes that if Ruth does all her mother in law asks, it will be okay. But it is again, a time for courage for Ruth. A whole set of doubts could have come up in her mind. A single lady wandering around at dusk and evening - is that safe? And what of the response by Boaz. Simply NO. Or he shouts, is offended at a woman uncovering his feet - which can also mean legs - Or even worse, he is not so kind, and he may sadly take advantage of just the two of them together... and claim otherwise later.

So the plan is put into action.

Boaz wakes up. Ruth departs from the plan.

She takes initiative. Doesn't wait for him to speak. 'Spread the corner of your garment.' These words can have two meanings in the Hebrew. Singular word - it can point to marriage, so Ruth takes the initiative and proposes marriage. But the word in its plural form - points to wings. Boaz had wished - prayed - that Ruth would be mightily blessed under the wings of the God of Israel, (2:12). God had made a covenant with his people to love and protect them, Ruth asks Boaz to act in a similar way to her, as he has already been doing. God's care is to be the model she asks of Boaz. Again, he has prayed for this, and now she asks him to be God's agent.

Of course, for husbands, this takes us immediately in mind to the great challenge of how God is to be our model of how to act towards our wives: Paul in Ephesians 5 - "Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy..." Boaz is to be an imitator of God, we husbands, to be imitators of Christ. To add to our personal reflections as husbands: if Eucharist reminds us of what Christ has done for us, it causes us to reflect, how does Eucharist, remind us of what it means to be a Christ shaped Christ copying husband towards the one we have committed our lives to.

Boaz exclaims. I imagine he is quite loud when he says this! "This kindness is greater than that which you have showed earlier." The first kindness? The word is *hesed* - which is translated as kindness / faithfulness etc. What is the *hesed*? How she acted to Naomi - she refused the chance to be released of commitments to Naomi on that point in the road, she could have gone home instead of becoming a migrant worker. She committed herself to Naomi and travelled to Bethelhem. The second kindness - is to him - Boaz. He says she could have looked towards the younger

men - whether rich or poor. She gave kindness to Naomi, now Ruth gives kindness to him.

Maybe it shows when he says she is of noble character. Has he thought about her, paid attention to what people said, or asked them even? Maybe he has been someone who felt they were too old to marry, perhaps here was someone he was drawn to, maybe there were many reasons in his past why he had not married. Naomi's desire that Ruth would enjoy once again marriage; Boaz's response, that he too, like many, can now enjoy marriage...perhaps he too was empty and now fullness is coming. A delight in his heart, a kindness has come to him.

I think it is important to quote my old tutor about his chapter - "Here we have a delicate and sensitive account of a couple taking the risk of declaring their love for each other, each nervous about the other's reaction. It is a beautifully human story and all who have experienced similar situations will empathize with it." (Fyall, Robert, *Ruth*, pg30).

To share an additional *theological point*. As the Jewish writers and rabbis remind us, each letter, each word matters in the word. Boaz says - literally "Blessed are you to Yahweh." Boaz's words make Ruth only one of seven individual women blessed in the Old Testament. The others? Rebekah blessed by her family when she leaves home to marry Isaac, Laban blessed his daughters Leah and Rachel when they leave; Deborah blessed Jael for killing Israel's enemy with the tent peg; priest Eli blessed Hannah; David blessed wise Abigail, when she prevents him from killing needlessly.

Ruth however is in the only one Blessed in this way, God's name invoked, she is directly connected to God. As Boaz 'may you be blessed of the LORD.'" At this stage, one thing to note. Ruth is

from Moab. She is a Gentile. God had declared - 'Through Abraham's offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.' And here, we see a Gentile receiving blessing from Israel.

*A final application.*

Some people could read this story and see the mother in law plotting, to trap a wealthy bachelor! Others could see, poor Ruth, who marries for the money not for love, with this older man.

We cannot read emotions. But we can read the text closely. What have we learned so far from these 3 chapters? Ruth is a devout believer. She committed her life to Yahweh on the road. Boaz and others know this, he tells her when they first meet at the field, that she has chose to come under the wings of Yahweh. Again Boaz says in this nighttime discussion, that "all the people of my town know you are a woman of noble character."

Boaz's own faith has been pointed to often. He asks for God's presence - 'Yahweh be with you' - with his workers in their work, and they desire that Yahweh bless him. He talks to her. He commits his own resources **But** he also wishes - prays - for Yahweh to richly reward her - his life is holistic - faith, life, work, relationships integrated. Again, Ruth asks him to spread his garment - the wings - over her. His response - 'May you be blessed of Yahweh.' And when he commits to resolve this situation the next morning he swearing that if the other man will not redeem, then he will, by an oath 'by the Lord.' A life of a man seeking to have Yahweh at the centre.

Both Ruth and Boaz have shown grace, kindness, compassion, generosity and sacrifice. And doesn't their actions reflect that of Yahweh - the one we said who declared his name to Moses:



The LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed: "Yahweh. Yahweh, compassionate, and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness (hesed) and truth." (Exodus 34).

Their actions reflect Yahweh's own character. It means for us - reminds us - that we expect their behaviour has flowed from their commitment to the Lord. They have committed to the Lord, their faith shown by how they have spoken, and their lifestyle has flowed from their faith commitment.

We see lives shaped by their faith - in Ruth's case, a faith of only weeks or a few months old - and lives that reflect the character of their God. It causes us to pause once again. *How can our lives increasingly reflect the character of God?*

Three practices and attitudes. Firstly. To reflect upon the gospel stories of Jesus - how does my life reflect his character? How does his character point the way towards mine - for that is the direction the Spirit is wanting to lead us in, as Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 3 - "And we all, are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

That is the second point: That is where the work of the Spirit wants to lead us - transformation in this life, not just when the Lord returns. And that gives us hope. Lord, this is where you are going, I know and trust you want to transform me, I'm not a lost cause, so heal me, and help me to work and walk with you in this.' Yes we make commitments, but the Spirit is within to work and transform.

Thirdly. The character of God - praying into the statements of who he is - an asking the Lord to work these out further in your life. You see you do already reflect the image of Jesus. That is the

promise for every Christian - Paul says we are being transformed with *increasingly* glory, which suggests each of us, do already reflect some glory. Just more glory to come in this life! So meditate upon the statements of Yahweh and here comes authentic prayer - honest prayer - as we heard Naomi declare at the start, how she felt - we declare where we are failing, struggling and why.

And so it all seems sorted. But like any second last episode of a series or season, a twist - there is someone else. And so Ruth has to sleep knowing this. And when she goes home and shares with Naomi, we are none the wiser how or what will happen the next morning... Naomi says

"wait my daughter until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

Shall we pray:

Lord, we thank you for how we are being transformed with ever increasing glory into your image. Please Lord keep doing it. Keep stirring us to hunger and desire it. May our faith soak and shape all we say and do and may we be instruments used by you to bring healing in pain, fullness where empty, joy where there is despair. In Jesus name. Amen.