

THE KINDNESS OF GRACE

(Ruth 2.14-23)

Introduction

So we continue our journey through the delightful book of Ruth. If you have been away for any of the last three Sundays, you'll have missed some, or all, of the story up till now, so I'm going to briefly review what we've looked at so far, and then focus on today's reading.

Ruth is set in the days when the Judges ruled in Israel, the Dark Ages of the Bible, when no one sought the Lord, and everyone did as they thought best.

The story begins with a series of tragedies; a famine in Bethlehem, the relocation of a distressed family to a strange land, the death of the breadwinner Elimelek, the intermarriage of his two sons with women who didn't know God, and then the sons' deaths too, leaving three destitute widows including Naomi, who changes her name from Pleasant to Bitter.

But then one of the younger widows, Ruth, converts to faith in the God of Israel and, in an act of breathtaking devotion, holds fast to her ageing mother-in-law. They both journey to Bethlehem, which by this time has returned to agricultural abundance.

It just so happens that Ruth ends up in the field of a good man named Boaz, and she is allowed to harvest the edges of the field and gather the leftovers that everyone else missed.

This was basically the equivalent of a foodbank and it was legislated for in the Bible to save widows and orphans and foreigners from starvation.

God is still at work today in foodbanks. About five years ago, a group of Christians acting on Jesus' words to feed the hungry, began a foodbank and drop-in in Halifax.

Many vulnerable people, often with chaotic lifestyles, started coming to collect a free food parcel. There were homeless people, there were destitute single parents, there were asylum seekers, there were people in debt getting ripped off by loan sharks, there were young people on drugs or already alcoholics.

And something started to happen. People started to ask for prayer. They began to see those prayers answered, and one by one, many came into a relationship with God and a new church was started.

Their strap line is beautiful, listen to this: "We believe that everyone is significant, nothing is impossible, everything was accomplished at the cross, and we are loved with an extravagant, everlasting love."

They're seeing the restoration of hope where there was no future. They've baptized over a hundred new adult believers in Jesus in the last three years. This is Jesus, this is what he does; this is what he's like.

Providence

From 1.6 onwards, there have been several "twists of fate" as we might see it. "As it turned out" the Bible says in 2.3. *It just so happened* that (1) it was harvest time when Ruth and Naomi arrived, and that (2) Ruth ended up in Boaz's field, and that and that (3) he passed by that day, and that (4) he noticed a hardworking young woman he didn't remember hiring and that (5) he asked about her, and that (6) the guy he asked knew her story; that she was a penniless foreigner who had shown amazing kindness and devotion to her mother-in-law Naomi, and that (7) he told Boaz the whole story.

And it just so happens... that Boaz is the kindest, most Godly boss you could work for. He comes into work with a big smile on his face and says to all his employees, "The Lord be with you!"

Remember this is the godless time of the Judges. Nobody is interested in spiritual things. Nobody talks about God at work. But Boaz does.

He notices the new girl and he assigns good, mature, supportive women to look after her and help her settle in. He introduces the world's first zero tolerance sexual harassment at work policy to protect her. He sees to it personally that she gets all the refreshment breaks she needs.

Divine intervention happens in two ways. Firstly, God sometimes does an amazing miracle. He gives dreams and visions, he heals the sick, he inspires accurate prophecies, he answers prayer in incredible ways, he changes the weather, he sends angels...

But most of the time, God works *invisibly*; weaving the routine circumstances of our lives into the grand narrative of his purposes. Someone has called these kinds of coincidences "God-incidences." The story of Ruth is full of them.

On the reverse side of both realities; of miracles and providence, is prayer.

The author John Ortberg talks about his Uncle Otis who was a prayer warrior and saw many signs and wonders. He once prayed for a man who told him that he suffered from constipation. So he laid a hand on this poor man and closed his eyes and prayed earnestly, "Lord, heal this man immediately!" Thankfully, that particular prayer went unanswered...

Thus far in Ruth we have encountered two prayers. The first is found in 1.8-9 and it says "May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that you will find rest in the home of another husband."

The second comes in 2.12; "May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

By the end of the book, as we'll see, both prayers are answered in every last detail.

The Story Continues...

So we pick up today in chapter 2, verse 14.

It's lunch time and what I love about Boss of the Year Boaz is that he notices this outsider, with a foreign accent, all on her own, without a friend in the world.

It's her first day at work, she hasn't brought a packed lunch, she doesn't know what to do. He notices – and invites her to join him for lunch.

Boaz is the big cheese, remember. He owns the whole field. He hires and fires the workers. He'd expect to be waited on by servants. But look, v14! Who is serving whom? Boaz is serving Ruth, this nobody on her first day.

Here is a courteous man who honours and serves a woman; he sits her down, he offers her all that's on the table.

She eats her fill, and in fact has more than enough because there's plenty left over to take home to Naomi. Boaz, in other words, supplies abundantly more than Ruth can ask or imagine. This looks like grace.

Is Boaz starting to remind you of anyone? Who said this? "The one at table greater is than the one who serves. But I am among you as one who serves." Jesus.

Boaz is like Jesus. There is a striking resemblance, a *family* resemblance in fact because, as we'll see in two weeks' time, Boaz is actually an ancestor of Jesus.

The book of Ruth, though written over 1,000 years before Christ, is all about Jesus. There are shadows of Jesus all over the book of Ruth.

Boaz, like Jesus, sees Ruth's *heart*. He sees how loyal she has been, how she pours out life for others. He sees that she's hard working; she's not expecting something for nothing. He sees her humility, she's not above menial work. He sees her heart for God, how she gave up on her false gods in Moab to seek refuge under the wings of the God of Israel.

Boaz could have looked at all Ruth's baggage instead. There's plenty of it. She's a foreigner, she's penniless, she's on welfare, she's not a virgin, she's dirty and sweaty from working in the fields all morning, picking up the leftovers, and she's got a bitter mother-in-law...

Ruth has very little going for her. But Boaz is like Jesus. He sees past the baggage.

I heard a true story recently from about five years ago about a single mother with crippling debts whose young child had a serious illness. She lived in a large American city and health care is expensive there. She didn't know what to do. She found her way to a church and heard the gospel and was converted and got baptized, and they helped her to get her life sorted out.

One young couple in the church, who had good jobs, heard about this woman and her son and their hearts were moved with compassion. They had just bought a nice shining 4x4 but they felt the Lord speak to them about it. So they took the car back to the showroom, cashed it in, and took this woman and her boy under their wing.

They fixed her up with somewhere to stay near the hospital and paid all the bills. They paid for her little boy's health care. And he got better. They helped her find a job and wrote references for her and she got her life on track. This is the church. This is who we are.

When God looks at you, if you have faith in Jesus he doesn't see your baggage. He doesn't see any sin, he doesn't see your failures, he doesn't see your darkness, he doesn't see your unworthiness – he sees only the perfect record of Jesus.

So Boaz (v15-16) tells his men to be kind to her, to not treat her harshly, or make her cry, and give her all the breaks she needs.

Ruth works hard until sundown (v17) and in one day she makes the equivalent of six week's wages. At that rate she will have earned a year's wages by the end of the barley harvest.

She gets home (v18-19), gives Naomi the doggie bag from lunch and shows Naomi what she earned that day. Naomi can't hide her amazement. "Wow, how did you glean *all that* in one day? What field were you in? Who's the boss? This is amazing!"

Naomi, this woman who said, "Call me bitter" in chapter 1 has started to taste the sweetness of grace and her heart is warming. A smile is returning to her mouth. "The Lord bless him" she says. Not "Wow, that was lucky!" She sees the beginning of the answer to her prayers. Look, she's becoming a worshipper again!

By the end of chapter 2 Naomi and Ruth have shelter, a good income, food and security and prayers are being answered. They haven't got everything they hope for, but through the kindness of God's grace they are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Ending

As I close, notice this; Boaz invites Ruth to his table to eat and drink, and there was bread and wine. She has nothing to bring to the table, nothing to offer, just herself. And she sits in the presence of this kind spiritual giant, who is full of grace.

Jesus invites us to *his* table this morning. There is bread and wine. Like Ruth, we have nothing to bring to the table, nothing to offer, just ourselves. We can all feast on the abundance of the Lord's grace today, and enjoy the presence of the one who changed our spiritual rags to heavenly riches.

Let's pray...