

UNEXPECTED CHARACTER

Unexpected Series (Part 3) | Text: Ruth 2

Review of the Story

The story of Ruth is like one of those flowers that pushes itself up in the crack of a wall or sidewalk. Bounded on either side by the great granite blocks of history recorded in the Book of Judges and the Books of Samuel, the Book of Ruth seems strangely out of place. Pinned between the account of the movements of great armies and the doings of leaders in high places, the tale of Ruth seems oddly particular, unusually ordinary. It's a story about regular rank-and-file people – the kind of people who never or rarely make the news, except as examples of the terrible things that happen to some people.

But the story of Ruth is a reminder to those of us that history is not always influenced most by the events that occupy the popular media. It is a challenge to the belief that suffering and confusion is a sign that there is no plan or providence at work, and that life is all chaos and randomness in the end. The Book of Ruth shows us that oftentimes it is what God does in the life of a single individual, maybe not even one whom others regard as significant, that later winds up being the true turning point of history. It shows us that great events and much good news can be built on the shards of dashed hopes and broken hearts.

No one looking at the life of Naomi and Ruth in chapter 1 would be inclined to believe that much good would come of it. Here were women who simply seemed to be casualties of life's tough breaks. In the face of famine, a Jewish woman named Naomi and her husband become refugees in the land of Moab, one of Israel's most bitter enemies. A risky prospect to begin with, life suddenly turns worse. Before they can really get a foothold in their new home, Naomi's husband dies. Normally, she'd be able to lean on her sons for help, but they too die prematurely. Living in a strange land, with no high prospects for survival (much less success), Naomi decides to pack up and try to make her way back to Israel. Her two Moabite daughters-in-law (Orpah and Ruth) say they'll go with her. Naomi protests, insisting that they are young and that their lives don't have to go down the tubes just because Naomi's is ruined.

As we said last time, every life is marked by struggles. We may not be able to relate to Naomi and Ruth at every point, but into most lives come tough changes and challenges: Conflicts. Famines. Transitions/Moves. Losses/Death. Pandemics. What determines the ultimate outcome or fruit of a life is usually not whether one has been able to escape one's difficult circumstances, but what kind of choices one has made in the face of such struggles – whether you've been able... to build again instead of giving up; to forgive instead of harboring bitter resentment; to look for a window where a door has been closed; to dare to love anew when your heart has been broken; to dust yourself off and move on instead of lying buried in the dust forever.

The choice to commit to relationships – particularly when that requires sacrifice – is one of the most influential of all choices that one can make. It is that choice that shines as the awe-inspiring light in the midst of the darkness of chapter 1. When she had every reason and opportunity and encouragement to leave her mother-in-law to live out her own miserable future on her own, the Moabite woman we call Ruth, made the choice to faithfully care for Naomi to the very end. **Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. (Ruth 1:16-17).**

As we explored last week, Ruth gave up... her family of origin to go where she really had no family; her native country to enter the country of an enemy; a place where there was food to go to one that might not have much; her best remarriage prospects for a situation where her prospects were slim if not none. And all of this for a mother-in-law so bitter and depressed she makes Debbie Downer look cheerful!

In this way, Ruth foreshadows the indefatigable faithfulness and sacrificial love of Someone who would one day cross an even greater distance and give up even more to demonstrate his care for his adopted family. But we're getting ahead of the story. Chapter 1 ends with Naomi and Ruth trudging back across the Moabite desert and over the Jordan River and up into the hill country south of Jerusalem where stood a small village called Bethlehem. We're told that they arrived just – **as the barley harvest was beginning. (Ruth 1:22)**

The Story Continues

Let's pick up the story there – chapter 2, verse 1. **Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz. (Ruth 2:1)** This is an interesting start to this portion of the story. Although we don't meet Boaz for several more verses, he is mentioned right up front to indicate the radical turn of events that God is bringing about. Chapter 1, you see, has been about the progressive death and disappearance of MEN upon whom the heroines had wanted to be able to depend. Even the very names of the men who have been in Naomi and Ruth's life thus far suggest their fragility: **Mahlon** literally means = "*sickly one.*" The name **Kilion** means = "*pinning one.*"

In acting in faith and love toward Naomi, Ruth had surrendered almost any hope of every marrying again. But chapter 2 begins by suddenly turning the tables UNEXPECTEDLY. It starts by introducing a new man into the story, a relative of Naomi's dead husband, **whose name was Boaz** – which literally means = "*he who comes in strength.*" Remember that, because, at least poetically speaking, it proves very significant later.

Boaz and Ruth have something in common, even before they are introduced to one another. For one thing, they are BOTH people who move through life with a gracious strength. But there's a second connection, too. Both of these people come from "colorful" families, if you get my drift – the kind of very imperfect families that neighbors would whisper about.

As Suanne reminded us last week, the Bible keeps repeating that Ruth is a Moabite, as if that makes her an unlikely hero in this story. And it does. We've already told you that, as a Moabite, Ruth is from a nation that was an enemy of Judah – the place where she's now gone with Naomi to live. But being a Moabite also means that Ruth is a direct descendent of Lot, the infamous nephew of Abraham whose life and wife was well-associated with Sodom and Gomorrah, history's ultimate Sin Cities.

Boaz comes from a sullied lineage too. His mother was Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute, whose principal positive quality was that she harbored some Israelite spies when they were scouting out the city of Jericho for conquest. I hope you are getting this picture. Neither Ruth nor Boaz was exactly pureblooded aristocrat by any standard of that day. They are both UNEXPECTED heroes. They are a reminder that Human pedigree is never a stopper when it comes to exercising God's power and plan. That's good news, because some of us have a checkered history and family too, don't we?

In any event, the two women arrive hungry from their long journey... **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." So she went out and began to GLEAN in the fields behind the harvesters. (Ruth 2:2-3)**

Now, this mention of "gleaning" is a really interesting cultural detail, an important plot prelude, and a significant pointer to the heart of God. God's Law specifically mandated that when people were harvesting their fields, they should not go back and pick up the grain that got dropped in the natural process of cutting and gathering the principle part of the harvest. Why was that? It was because God intended to build a natural charity into the balance of Israel's life. The droppings were to be left for the poor to come along behind and pick up, so that they too might be fed. It was a beautiful system: The first harvesters were spared the hassle of cleaning up behind themselves. The second harvesters had something with which to feed their families. Everybody won.

I contrast that vision with an orchard near where Amy and I used to live in Southern California. The orchard was owned by the diet maven, Jenny Craig. It was right next to a landscape of gullies and arroyos where hundreds of the Mexican families who took care of Rancho Santa Fe's fabulous gardens and homes lived in pretty tough conditions. I'll never forget the sight of all the fallen fruit beneath those orange trees. It sat rotting on the ground behind high fences, while the kids next door went hungry.

God intended something better than that, and I want to celebrate those of you whose generous commitment to our Food & Supplies Drive suggests that you definitely get that. Godly stewardship implies both a commitment to giving the firstfruits of our lives to God and the gleanings to the least of his brothers and sisters. This still leaves us with more than a generous middle portion to enjoy ourselves.

In any case, I invite you to picture Ruth out there in the fields of Bethlehem. She's following along behind the first harvesters, gathering up the left-overs in her apron. And the Bible says: **As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech. (Ruth 2:3)** I invite you to key in on that first phrase, "As it turned out." It sounds like a blithe statement about the randomness and chance occurrences of life. But it isn't. It is a confession of wonder at the fact that somehow amidst the often chaotic flow of events, things happen that suggest that there is an Architect, a Conductor, a Tapestry-Weaver at work behind the scenes of life.

Think of how many times you've said that phrase yourself. My life story is punctuated significantly with that phrase. My life came crashing down when I was 17 but, **"as it turned out,"** that collapse made me open to seeking more dependable foundations. My father forced me to go to a Christian conference when I was 18 but, **"as it turned out,"** I became a Christian there. I lost a coveted job in England within two weeks of graduating from college but, **"as it turned out,"** I wound up in Belfast Northern Ireland in an experience that redirected my life from politics toward the work I now do. I went on a blind date foisted upon me by an annoying friend but, **"as it turned out,"** that was the night I met Amy. The next time you are despairing over some circumstance in your life, Make a list of the "as it turned outs" in your life and grow your trust in the providential hand of God.

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!" "The LORD bless you!" they called back. Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?" (Ruth 2:4-5) I love the sheer beauty and humanity of this exchange. Boaz arrives and starts talking with the guys on the harvesting crew. In mid-sentence he spots the curve of a form or a face he's never seen out there before and goes slack-jawed for a moment. *"Uh, er... Who's that?! I mean, who's she married to?"* Then grins, as he notices she isn't wearing a ring. I don't know – maybe I'm reading too much in here. Maybe I've just watched one too many Rom-Coms during quarantine. Perhaps Boaz just noticed a stranger on the work crew and asked a perfectly natural question. Whatever the case... **The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi." She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter." (Ruth 2:6-7)**

I suppose Boaz might just have been impressed with Ruth's work ethic or her gleaning technique. I remember reading in the autobiography of Watergate conspirator, G. Gordon Liddy, that he had selected his wife "for her excellent bone structure and fine math skills"! Somehow, I suspect that Boaz' care ran a bit deeper than that... **So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." (Ruth 2:8-9)**

Think about what these words must have meant to Ruth. She was hungry and thirsty after a long journey. She was far from her family and country of origin. She was a despised Moabite in the land of Israel. She was justifiably afraid of being brutalized in a world where women were often raped and abused without thought. She was trying to scrape out just one more day of mere existence if she could. And into her life comes this stranger who displays an **UNEXPECTED CHARACTER** – a strong, tender, kindness, an unexpected grace, something like the character she had shown to Naomi.

At this, [Ruth] bowed down with her face to the ground. It was an act of tremendous humility and abject gratitude. **She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me--a foreigner?" (Ruth 2:10)** In various forms, this is the question whose cousins populate the rest of scripture and the history of the Church. *"You want me – a murderer -- to represent you before Pharaoh?"* asks Moses. *"You are mindful of me, O Lord of the infinite heavens?"* inquires David. *"You've chosen me – a man of unclean lips – to reveal your glory to?"* says Isaiah. *"You've selected me, a mere peasant girl, to bear the Messiah?"* wonders Mary. *"You want to have lunch at my house, with me, a tax collector?"* asks Zacchaeus. *"You would give living water to me?"* says the woman at the well. *"You would touch me?"* replies the leper. *"You would kill the fatted calf and throw a party for me, Father?"* asks the prodigal son. *"You would have me as your Apostle?"* inquires Saul. *"And can it be that I should gain an interest in the savior's blood?"* the hymn-writer asks. *"Died he for me, who caused his pain, for me who him to death pursued. Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God shouldst [care] for me?"*

This is the great message of the gospel. God delights in blessing, and blessing others through, those whose humility prevents them from seeing why they should ever be worthy of such blessing. Maybe YOU are someone like that. Ruth is. She has chosen to live by the rule of grace in a way that makes those who value grace want to pour it out upon her. **Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband--how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. 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." (Ruth 2:11-12)**

We're being told here that the concern of Boaz does indeed go beyond or maybe entirely transcends at this point a merely romantic concern for Ruth. He sees in the faithfulness of Ruth a CHARACTER that he knows that God would honor. **"May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant--though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls." (Ruth 2:13)**

Thus begins the remarkable relationship of Ruth and Boaz. **At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar." When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her." So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough. (Ruth 2:14-18)**

Do you see the abundance that now contrasts with the state Ruth was in prior to her decision to be faithful and sacrificial in her commitment to Naomi? This sort of scenario is one of the consistent messages of Scripture. In Malachi 3:10, God promises to bless beyond imagination those who are faithful, even to the point of great sacrifice. **Test me in this,** says the Lord Almighty, **and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.** In Philippians 2 and elsewhere, God promises to exalt the humble servant.

In this instance, Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi, is stupefied by the blessings... **Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" (Ruth 2:19)** We are often shocked when virtue is unexpectedly rewarded, aren't we? **Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said. "The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers." Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.' " Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed." So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law. (Ruth 2:19-23)**

Thoughts To Take With You

Let me close today by leaving you with a few thoughts to take with you, but do so in the form of a few questions to ponder...

1. How have you experienced God's providential care "as it turned out"? Praise God for this.
2. Are there any difficult changes or challenges that you are facing right now in which you might more fully trust God's goodness and wait upon the unfolding of his plan?
3. If you believed that grace truly begets even greater grace, then in what relationships or situations of your life might you demonstrate additional sacrificial grace in the days ahead?
4. In what ways does Boaz (the "Kinsman-Redeemer") foreshadow or prefigure the ministry of Someone else who adopts the faithful into His family and redeems them?

You see, this story of Ruth and Boaz points us to an even greater story of an UNEXPECTED CHARACTER who will change all of life. Come on back next week, as we continue to discover that truth.

Please pray with me...