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Reading: Ruth 2

Title: The Book of Ruth: Discovering Kindness

Introduction

You're on holiday, Sunday morning comes around, and so you decide you'll take the opportunity to visit a different church. You go online and work out what time the service is, and where you need to go, and what you should wear. But that doesn't stop you from wondering – *what will it be like?*

I don't know about you, but I actually find it quite terrifying to have to walk into a new church for the first time. Maybe you can relate. Maybe you're even a visitor here at Riverbank this morning, in which case I want to say, hats off to you! I really admire your courage, and I really want to say a warm welcome! I so hope you feel at home here today.

What will this new church be like? Will I be warmly welcomed? Will they do that thing in the middle of the service where you have to chat to the person next to you? Maybe I'll even be invited back to someone's house for a meal afterwards. Or maybe I'll just be an invisible ghost, slipping in and out of the doors without anyone wanting to talk to me. Or maybe they'll actually give me the cold shoulder and judge me for my clothes, or my ethnicity, or my children. Maybe someone will tap me on the back and say, 'Excuse me, but you're actually sitting in my chair.'

Now, at one level, I guess these are just the same issues we face when we go to any kind of party or event or function. But there's something unique about church, isn't there? There's something more going on at church because *the way a church welcomes people actually says something about God*. It sends a message about who Jesus loves and cares for.

This morning, we're going to see what happens when two destitute widows walk into church for the first time. Well, sort of. We're continuing our sermon series in the book of Ruth, which began last week when we met poor Naomi. She's a crushed, hurting lady who has endured more than her fair share of suffering. Her husband and both her sons have died, she's desperately poor, she's got no income, no superannuation, no pension. She does have a relationship with God, but it's in tatters. She's given up believing that God has anything good in store for her, because all she can see is his heavy hand against her. She's reluctantly decided to return to Israel, back to God's land and God's people – but she's returning bitter and empty.

Well, almost empty. Standing beside Naomi is her daughter-in-law Ruth, also a widow and a foreigner from Moab. Ruth has come to support and care for Naomi, but she's a Moabite, about to walk into a foreign country with no visa and no connections. And so the question hanging over us as we turn to chapter 2 is, *what will Ruth and Naomi find as they return?* What's going to happen to them? Ruth has put her trust in Naomi's God, but what sort of God will he prove to be? And what will his people be like?

Naomi is the hurting woman who hasn't been to church for 20 years, who still has some sort of faith in God, but doesn't really expect much. Her plan is to sit in the back row with her sunglasses on, avoid talking to people, grab some free morning tea, and then leave. And as for Ruth, well, she's a refugee who's only just arrived in the country. She's got broken English and a thick accent, and she's walking into church with no idea what to expect except that someone told her Australia is a Christian nation and she should meet this guy called Jesus.

I think this chapter has a lot to say to us this morning to. What should we expect when we come to God, when we return to him empty and decide to put our trust in him? For those of us who've come here this morning, burdened by life, afflicted with sin, weary and tired and jaded and

hurting... How will God treat us? What kind of God is he? And what about his people? What are they like? If you, or your neighbour, or your workmate, were to walk into church, or open the Bible, what might they hope to discover? That's what we're going to think about today as we look at Ruth chapter 2.

And there's a hint as we begin that perhaps, just perhaps, we might discover something quite wonderful. In verse 1, we're given an intriguing piece of information. It turns out that Naomi has a relative, a man from her husband's clan, whose name is Boaz. And we're told that Boaz was 'a man of standing.' In other words, he was a wealthy influential member of society. As a destitute widow, that sounds like someone worth knowing! But the storyteller holds his cards close to his chest, and so we have to store away this intriguing piece of information and keep reading.

A Law of Kindness (v1-3)

In verse 2, Ruth steps forward and takes centre stage. Who is this fascinating Moabite woman who has put up her hand to move to Israel? Well, it turns out she's a woman of initiative and resourcefulness. She says to Naomi, 'Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour.' Naomi supports her plan, and so we're told that Ruth when out, entered a field, and began to glean behind the harvesters.

Now at this point in the story, there's some background information we need to know. Many years earlier, God had given a law to his people which said this, Leviticus 19:10: *'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. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen.'* Why? God goes on: *'Leave them for the poor and the foreigner.'* And again in Deuteronomy 24, God says, *'Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.'*

Isn't that awesome? This is the first thing we discover in our passage today: **a law of kindness**. Remember we're asking, what will Ruth and Naomi find as they return to Israel? Well, it turns out *they're actually returning to a society that has kindness and compassion built into its very laws!*

At harvest time, the reapers would cut the grain with sickles and then tie it into bundles. But they weren't supposed to harvest right to the edges of the field, and if some bits of grain fell out, they were to leave it behind for the poorest people of society to *glean* – that is, grovel along and pick up the scraps. It wasn't much, but if you were willing to work hard, you could provide for yourself and your family.

Now we need to stop for a second and ask, why did Israel have these laws? The answer is, because God commanded them. Why? In Leviticus 19, God says to do this *because I am Yahweh your God*. In other words, God says, I care about the outcast and lowly! I love them! And as my people, you should too!

There's a lot we can learn from these gleaning laws, but this morning I just want us to appreciate one main thing. I want us to see *the kindness of the God who put them in place*. The kindness of our mighty God who stands on the side of the helpless, the widow, the orphan, the refugee. He's their defender! He's their champion! I wonder if that's how you think about God? That the forgotten homeless man in Launceston, the bullied kid, the single mum, the mistreated immigrant, the lonely widow in the aged care facility... is a close to God's heart. And I wonder if you and I view the needy people around us with that same heart of compassion?

Well, Ruth sets out to glean in the fields, and she's well within her legal rights. But that doesn't mean things will actually go well for Ruth! Don't forget this story takes place in the time of the judges, when everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Later in this chapter, we're going to see just how dangerous it was for Ruth, a foreigner and a woman, to venture out into the fields on her own. And so in verse 2, she goes in search of someone 'in whose eyes she finds favour.' In other words, she's searching amongst God's people to see if there is anyone godly, anyone who still obeys God's law, anyone who might actually let her glean some leftover grain.

A Man of Kindness (v4-16)

That brings us to our second point. We've seen a law of kindness. Now secondly, *we meet a man of kindness.*

It all begins with a stroke of pure luck. We read in verse 3 that 'as it turned out', or 'as chance would have it', she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek. Well how about that! Of course this has nothing to do with God's mysterious providence. It's just a crazy coincidence, right?

And it's followed immediately by another coincidence. Verse 4, 'Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem.' Or literally, 'And behold! Boaz came!' Can you hear the tone of surprise as the storyteller draws our attention to this intriguing man, the very same influential relative who we were told about in verse 1? And then just as we're wondering what this Boaz-guy is like, we hear the first words out of his mouth as he walks onto the jobsite. Boaz greets the harvesters, 'The Lord be with you.' And they reply, 'The Lord bless you!' It's our first clue that perhaps this is a godly man.

And then as Boaz looks around to see that everything is business as usual, something catches his attention. He sees a woman he doesn't recognize. So he says to the overseer, 'Who does that woman belong to?' It might sound like a weird question to us, but he's really just saying, 'Which family or clan is she from?' At which point the overseer says, 'Actually, she's that Moabite who came back with Naomi. And she's a hard worker too. She's been hustling in the field all morning!'

Now at this point, we've all got our Hollywood glasses on, and we imagine that Boaz looks over, catches sight of Ruth, the stunner from Moab, and instantly falls in love with her. But it's so important we focus on what the storyteller wants to tell us. There's no mention of Ruth's appearance. What stands out about Ruth is her character – her loyalty to Naomi, her faith in Yahweh, and her work ethic. And as for Boaz, we shouldn't assume that he's fallen in love with Ruth. His main concern seems to be making sure that these two destitute widows are protected and provided for.

We're about to see just how kind and generous Boaz is! He walks up to Ruth in verse 8 and says, 'My daughter, listen to me.' The fact that he calls her daughter indicates he was significantly older than Ruth - this will be confirmed later in the story. Boaz says to Ruth, I want you to stay in my field and not go anywhere else. And I want you to stick close to the women who work for me. And I've told my men not to lay on a hand on you. What's going on here? Well, Boaz makes it clear that these are evil days when many people would have preyed on Ruth, perhaps heaping racist abuse on her, perhaps refusing to let her glean, perhaps even physically or sexually abusing her. And yet, in God's providence, Ruth just happened to stumble onto a field owned by godly, generous Boaz! Boaz who is now doing everything he can to protect Ruth.

But that's not all. In verse 9 he tells her to help herself to water whenever she wants it, instead of having to draw her own. And then at lunch time, Boaz invites her to come and sit with his

employees, as if to say, 'You're not an outcast, you're one of us!' And then not only does he offer her bread, but he even gives her roasted grain as well. Look at those beautiful words at the end of verse 14: 'She ate all she wanted *and had some left over.*' What an incredible reversal from the desperation and poverty we saw in chapter 1! Now Ruth's needs haven't just been met, but abundantly so! There are leftovers! This is a picture of extravagant generosity, of bountiful provision. Perhaps the leftovers remind you of Jesus feeding the 5000 and having food to spare because he's such a generous and powerful provider.

And then as if that wasn't enough, Boaz whispers to his men, "Let her gather among the sheaves and don't reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her." At this point, the generosity of Boaz is so extreme that it's almost comical! Instead of gleaning the leftovers, Ruth is invited to gather grain right up where the action is, and the harvesters are even pulling out stalks and saying, 'Hey Ruth, there's some over here... and here... oh and here's some more! Help yourself!'

This sort of kindness was unheard of. We would've been happy enough if Boaz had just allowed Ruth to glean. But Boaz goes far beyond the letter of the law. He's an incredible man who embodies the *spirit* of the law – a spirit of compassion and kindness and generosity. At this point, we can't help but see in Boaz a picture of Jesus, can we? A picture of jaw-dropping kindness, of lavish grace, of ridiculous generosity – given to the underserving, the outcast, the lowly, the helpless.

When we see the kindness of Boaz, we can't help but ask, *why?* Why is he so kind to Ruth? Which is exactly what Ruth is wondering too. In verse 10, she bows down with her face to the ground and asks, 'Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?'

Look at how Boaz responds, verses 11-12. '*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.*'

Notice how Boaz describes what Ruth has done. It's a direct echo of what Abraham did in Genesis 12:1 when he left his country, his people, and his father's household to go to the promised land. Boaz seems to realize that Ruth has really done exactly the same thing. He seems to be saying: Ruth, you may be a Moabite, but as far as I'm concerned you're a true daughter of Abraham. I've seen the kindness you've shown to your mother-in-law. I've seen how you've leapt into the arms of God without any safety net beneath you!

And so Boaz blesses her with these lovely words: 'May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.' Why does he talk about a reward? Is he saying, 'God owes you his grace because of how kind you've been to Naomi?' I don't think so, because we know grace isn't something we can earn. Rather, Boaz is saying, *may God reward you for taking refuge in him!*

He's preaching the gospel to her! He's saying, Ruth, it doesn't matter that you're a Moabite. It doesn't matter that you're broke. You've done the one thing that matters: *you've come to God and taken refuge in him.* You've set your heart on him. You've turned to him for protection. You've banked your future on God's faithful love and kindness. And Boaz says, when you do that, you can be darn sure that God won't hang you out to dry! Those are the very people God delights to save, and rescue, and show kindness to.

Boaz describes this with a beautiful image, an image that we also see a number of times in the Psalms. It's a picture of God as a mighty Eagle who spreads his wings over his baby eaglets to protect them. It's a picture of warmth, of security, of belonging, of kindness. And it's something that Ruth is experiencing first-hand, today, in this field, through Boaz. I love how Christopher Ash puts this: Boaz is 'the incarnate presence of the loving-kindness of the Lord himself.' The protection, the food and drink, the leftovers - it's all an act of overwhelming kindness from Boaz, but it's not just the kindness of Boaz. Ultimately, Ruth is experiencing the kindness of God himself. The defender of widows. The friend of refugees. The saviour of sinners.

In Boaz, Ruth is getting her first taste of something that you and I have experienced even more fully in Jesus Christ. The kindness of a man that leaves us breathless, kindness that flows directly from God's enormous heart in heaven. Kindness that eats with outcasts and losers, and welcomes little children, and forgives those who've screwed up epically. Kindness that goes to the cross and gives the most generous gift possible: the life of the Son of God, snuffed out for sinners like you and me. Kindness that adopts us into his family and showers us with every spiritual blessing. With forgiveness. With an eternal inheritance. And best of all, a place under the wings of the Eagle.

I wonder, have you taken refuge under the wings of the Eagle? Have you had your mind blown and your heart softened by the extravagant kindness of God that never runs dry?

What should people encounter when they open the Bible, or meet a Christian, or walk into our church on Sunday? *They should encounter the staggering kindness of God, perfectly displayed in Jesus Christ, and lived out through you and me as his hands and feet on earth.* When we follow the example of Boaz by showing God's kindness to others, especially the vulnerable, we become a community that puts God on display. God becomes attractive. And more and more, people from every nation, outcasts like Ruth, will be drawn in to find refuge under God's wings.

A Future of Kindness (v17-23)

Before we finish, there's one more thing we need to see in this story. We've seen a law of kindness, we've seen a man of kindness... now lastly, in verses 17-23, we see **a future of kindness.**

That evening, after a huge day of work, Ruth returns home to Naomi staggering under an enormous load of barley. Naomi's eyes are already starting to pop when suddenly Ruth also reveals the leftovers from her lunch! You can just hear the excitement in verse 19 as Naomi says, 'Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!'

And then we get a delightful plot twist as Ruth announces that his name is Boaz, and suddenly Naomi's eyes light up. Ruth doesn't know who he is, but Naomi does! 'Ruth, he's our close relative. In fact, he's one of our guardian-redeemers!' What is a guardian-redeemer? Again, we have to go back to God's law where it says that if someone had to sell their land because they needed the money to survive, then one of their relatives had the responsibility of buying back that land and restoring it to the original owner. The redeemer had many other potential duties too, including to redeem poor relatives who had sold themselves into slavery.

All of a sudden, Boaz goes from being some random generous godly man to being a near relative who actually has an obligation to help Ruth and Naomi! It's another fascinating development in the story which raises many questions. What scheme is Naomi cooking up? What will she ask the redeemer to do? And will Boaz say yes? This story is far from over.

But right now, Naomi and Ruth are rolling in grain like mobsters rolling on a bed of cash. Their problems are far from over, but this grain is proof that they really have come under Yahweh's wings. For the rest of the harvest, probably about two months, Ruth will go back to the field of Boaz every day and glean. It's a wonderful provision, and for the first time in a long time, bitter Naomi begins to see again the kindness of God. She says in verse 20, 'He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.' Things are far from easy, but the kindness of the redeemer has given Naomi renewed faith.

This food is like a down-payment, a deposit, guaranteeing that there is more kindness to come. And so it is for us. As we return to God, we discover a kind and godly man named Jesus who has pledged to look after us and protect us. He doesn't instantly rush us to heaven and take away all our struggles, but we can have absolute confidence in him because we've already begun to experience his kindness and faithfulness. In 2 Corinthians 1 we read these amazing words: 'For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ... Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.'

In other words, everything we enjoy now as Christians – the forgiveness of sins, our adoption as God's children, his nearness and comfort, his Holy Spirit in our hearts – all of these things are just the first-fruits of God's kindness. They're just the first taste! There's so much more to come! The Holy Spirit in our hearts is a deposit, guaranteeing that one day in the future, our redemption will be complete and we will dwell under the wings of the Eagle forever, eternal recipients of his limitless kindness.