

I've never really known what it's like to be starving. Yes, I've had to fast in prep for a procedure and I've been sick and not feeling like eating. But I've never been without food. Where there is no way of finding any food. When the money has all gone and there is no way of buying even a loaf of bread. I've not known famine or war rationing or poverty.

I live a very privileged and secure life. I live in a country with amazing political stability, vast natural resources, generous social security, wonderful medical care, clear laws and policing, and freedoms.

I'm a larger than life person. Some say that's my most endearing quality others say it's my worse. But, regardless either way, I used to be noticed.

I could, and to my shame, probably do, go about my daily life as though this was how everybody is. But worse, these 'goodness-es', these privileges, this position of security becomes in my thinking a right, an expectation and I want more, I want it protected for my sake, I become the centre of my world. I become the most important, it becomes all about me. And because it becomes about me, I lose the eyes to see where this is not the situation for others.

I don't see the injustices; I don't see the divides between the haves and the have-nots. If I notice those who sleep rough, it's because it disturbs my idyllic. I don't see or I blur out racial discrimination, I don't hear the voices of those who are abused or neglected or without.

I have been blessed. In so many more ways that I can recount. Above all, I have been blessed by God in his rich mercy revealing himself to me, opening my eyes to Jesus as Lord and Saviour, pouring his Holy Spirit within me, giving me his word and hearing my prayers.

As we pick up our story of Ruth, here in chapter 2, these are the underlying currents. What was God's biggest criticism of his people during the time of the Judges? Twice we're told that **all the people did what was right in their own eyes**. That is they made their own rules, they did whatever pleased them without thought or concern for others, without reference to God's ways, they were a law unto themselves.

And the stories in Judges show us how quickly that leads to systemic evil of injustice, murder, rape, neglect and a breakdown of society.

The marginalised become more marginalised. The vulnerable are taken advantage of. The poor are neglected.

Ruth and Naomi are vulnerable, poor, suffering and in grief. Ruth a foreigner. Both widows. Both women in a very male dominated society. Hungry, no that's not strong enough, starving, scrapping the bottom of the barrel – literally. How on earth will they survive in an environment where everyone is just looking out for themselves?

This chapter opens with a tease. Verse 1 says *Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.*

Sounds like hope. But in a world of self-interest, in a world of everyman (and I use that phrase deliberately) for themselves, there is no guarantee that having a rich relative would do you any good.

Now listen to verse 2. And you'll see that Naomi did not put hope in the rich relative.

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." She said to her, "Go, my daughter."

Here is the foreigner, the non-Jew, the outsider – yes the faithful daughter-in-law but all the same the Moabite as we are reminded again – Ruth says let me go and glean. Let me go and pick up the scraps. There is desperation here. We need food. We need an income. Gleaning is just one step above begging. I almost hear in Naomi's answer of go my daughter a helplessness, the echo of her grief. She does not say I've got a rich relative – go and ask him.

But by chance – no by God's providence, by divine appointment, by grace, Ruth ends up in the field of this Boaz. But it is not certain how it will turn out.

But here in this mess, in this grief, in this desperation, in this uncertainty, God shows grace and kindness. And he does it abundantly.

As Ruth starts to gather up the sparse droppings, Just then (verse 4) Boaz comes from Jerusalem. The boss comes to check on the harvest. And we get to see the character of this man, and it is righteous. It is compassionate, it is kind, it is other centred and gracious. It is a character shaped by Yahweh, shaped by his belief and trust in God.

Look how he greets his works – "the Lord, Yahweh, be with you. And he notices the foreigner and enquires of her but not to reject, or condemn, or chase away. But to respond with care.

Look at how he responds. Verse 8.

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. ⁹ Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn."

Kindness upon kindness. Glean here – there will be enough for you. But the kindness is greater than that isn't it – stay close to my women – keep safe. And it's not just sentiment, its action, I have ordered the young men not to bother you. Things can turn rough, young women are not safe – sadness indeed – but Boaz is righteous and protecting the innocent and the vulnerable.

A real challenge to us – so often we are firm in what should be done and speak it out clearly but with mere words. How often do we follow up with actions? How often do we do all we can to ensure the safety of the vulnerable or the innocent?

And we see that Boaz is a man who is connected with his community. His wealth and position has not led him to be aloof. He has heard about Naomi's plight and of Ruth's actions.

And he honours this. He does not condemn her asking why would you come here, he does not belittle or embarrass her. But shows her kindness upon kindness.

Boaz provides her immediate needs verse 14 – come and eat, her full and more (which she will take home to Naomi knowing she is going hungry). And we see his provision of tomorrow's needs – verse 15. Intrusting his workers to not be as thorough and leave plenty for her to collect. Boaz is not just doing what the law said in Leviticus 19 but is going above and beyond. Not just the letter but the spirit of the law.

What an example of righteousness. And he is the agent of God's kindness to Ruth here and now. And as we know he will continue to be kindness upon kindness.

I can't begin to understand the battle that must be going on in Boaz's head. He wants to live out his faith, he wants to be shaped by the mercy of God and by the law of God. He wants to be generous in his interpretation of the law to provide for the gleaner of the needy and foreigner. But he would also know that Deuteronomy 23 specifically putting a permanent ban on Moabites because of what they did in the time of Moses. And yet the need is here in front of him.

But Boaz has seen the character of Ruth. Her compassion to Naomi. Her sacrifice in leaving Moab. Her hard work in gleaning. Her humility. Ruth is a woman who has suffered and has shown resolution, loyalty and courage. Above all she has shown kindness to her bereaved mother-in-law and has been willing to sacrifice her own prospects to do so. This is noticed by Boaz. This is noticed by God.

Listen to how Boaz speaks. Verse 11

Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹² May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!"

Isn't that a beautiful image – seeking refuge under the wings of the God. And God's kindness is to all who call out to him. All who seek him.

It's amazing to hear this story and to see the two components. Ruth seeking refuge and protection and food and mercy. And Boaz, being righteous, extending grace and protection, being the agent of God, being the wing of refuge.

Ruth goes home. It's been a big day. Hard work bending, picking up, in the heat, then thrashing and sifting, a slow tired walk back to Naomi, where she shares the food she kept from lunch and shows the ephah of barley just under 30kg. Wow. One day's work!

Naomi is ecstatic. Blessed be the man who took notice of you she says. And when Ruth tells Naomi that it was Boaz who she met, it's like Naomi's eyes are opened and she sees the hand of God in action. Look at verse 20

Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin."

What faith in the midst of grief! Seeing God's kindness, recognising God's kindness, knowing that God has not forsaken even in death, even in hardship, in grief or trouble. God's merciful kindness continues.

It's a real challenge for us to have the same mind, isn't it? To recognise the hand of God, to know his constant goodness, to see his kindness even in situations that are awful and hard.

But he does not forget his promise. He does not forget his people. And there is always hope. Did you hear it in Naomi's response? "And this man is a close relative." That's for next week.

I'm challenged by this chapter in a number of ways.

By Ruth's example of hard work and determination and resilience and loyalty.

By Boaz's character, mercy, compassion, godliness

By Naomi's trust in God

I'm also challenged to be a doer of faith not just a speaker of faith.

I'm challenged to be other person centred not self-centred.

I'm challenged to drink deep of the mercies and love of God so I may be more and more characterised by God's love and mercy.

Spoiler alert – there will be offspring from this story. It will lead to King David. God's rich mercy to his people. And from David will come Jesus, God's greatest kindness to all.

Oh that kindness of God that knows no bounds.

The applying of God's word to the messy business of life requires great wisdom and perseverance. Keep working at it. And remember, the kindness of God. He rewards those who seek after him. Keep seeking our great God. May you always know and always display the kindness of God in Jesus our Lord. Amen