

From Ruth's field to Bethlehem's child

Harvest Thanksgiving

Ruth 3:1–4:17; *Psalm* 100

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Harvest is a slow miracle.

Not the sudden kind, not the kind that dazzles in an instant.

Harvest begins in the hidden places, in soil turned over, in seeds pressed into darkness, in long stretches of waiting when nothing seems to be happening at all.

Weeks pass when the ground looks unchanged.

And then, quietly and steadily, life breaks through.

What was buried begins to rise.

The book of Ruth is that sort of miracle. A harvest that begins in sorrow, grows in obscurity, and finally breaks into joy.

Two weeks ago, we began with famine. Naomi and her family left Bethlehem, the “house of bread”, because there was no bread. She went seeking life, and instead found loss in the death of her husband, then both sons, until she returned home with only grief and a Moabite widow daughter-in-law beside her. “Call me Mara,” she said, meaning “bitter”. Naomi was empty.

But Ruth's story does not stay in chapter one. Life, even painful life, refuses to sit still.

Naomi returns home at the beginning of the barley harvest, and the first faint green shoots of hope appear. Then, last week, we found Ruth in the fields of Bethlehem, gathering fallen stalks of barley, the scraps left for the poorest in society. One handful of grain at a time, God's faithfulness began to show through small acts of kindness.

Ruth gleaned, Boaz noticed, Naomi hoped again.

And now, the story ripens. We turn to the threshing floor, the place where harvest is tested, sorted, and made ready to become bread once more.

Chapter three opens with Naomi beginning to imagine a future. She, who once declared herself empty, is now plotting hope. And *plotting* is how some commentators describe what she does. Women had few options in that society.

She tells Ruth to dress up, to wear perfume, to make herself attractive, perhaps alluring, and to go to the threshing floor, where Boaz is working late into the night. It is a risky place. Men ate, drank and slept there after harvest to guard the grain. Some women went there, but not respectable women, it was not a place where a young foreign widow would normally go.

Commentators debate endlessly about what Naomi expected to happen, what Ruth intended, and what Boaz understood. The Hebrew is ambiguous, the word for “feet” can imply further up the thigh. Some scholars insist on absolute propriety, others emphasise social vulnerability or possible exploitation.

But what matters most is not what may or may not have happened on the threshing floor, but the *hesed* that drives it – Ruth’s loyal, covenant love for Naomi; Ruth was ready to risk everything for Naomi – and then for Boaz’s response, woven together into God’s quiet work of redemption.

When Boaz wakes in the night, Ruth speaks plainly, “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian–redeemer of our family.”

This is a request for protection, justice, and *hesed*. To “spread your cloak” is to offer shelter, the same image used of God covering his people with faithful love.

Ruth asks Boaz to act according to the role of the go’el, the guardian–redeemer. In ancient Israel, the guardian–redeemer was the relative who restored what had been lost – redeeming land sold in crisis, protecting widows, and continuing the family line. It was a role rooted in God’s character, God who redeemed Israel from slavery and who commands care for the vulnerable.

Ruth cannot claim this right legally, she can only appeal to *hesed*.
And Boaz answers with astonishing grace.
He calls her a “woman of excellence.”
He promises to act.
He protects her reputation.
He sends her home with grain, a quiet sign that fullness is beginning.

Boaz embodies the *hesed* we have been tracing these three weeks – loyalty that acts, compassion that protects, faithfulness that goes beyond obligation.

Harvest is happening not only in the fields but in the lives of these ordinary people.

Chapter four shifts the scene to the city gate, the place where decisions are made and justice is done. Here, Boaz meets the unnamed nearer relative, the one with prior claim to redeem the land of Naomi’s family. At first, the man agrees to redeem the field, until he realises that redemption includes caring for Naomi, marrying Ruth, and raising a son in the name of Ruth’s dead husband. The man withdraws. Suddenly the cost seems too high.

So, he steps back. Boaz steps forward. And the elders declare him the redeemer.
Boaz does not buy a field for profit. Rather, he restores a family. He protects a widow. He welcomes a foreigner as his wife. He shows, again, the covenant *hesed* that makes community possible.
The story is beginning to overflow.

When Ruth’s son is born, the women of Bethlehem gather around Naomi. They speak words she could never have imagined hearing when she stood on the threshold of Bethlehem calling herself empty:

“Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian–redeemer. This child will renew your life. For your daughter–in–law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.”

Then they place the baby in her arms and call him *her* son.

It is a stunning reversal.

The woman who felt abandoned now cradles fullness.

The foreign widow becomes the ancestor of King David.

And from this quiet household, God brings forth the royal line through which Christ himself will come.

Scripture does not end the book of Ruth with moral lessons of modelling ourselves on Ruth's loyalty or Boaz's kindness, but with a genealogy to lift our eyes. The horizon of the story is not Naomi, nor Ruth, nor Boaz, but the Redeemer to whom their faithfulness points.

For the book of Ruth is not about exceptional heroes.

It is about ordinary people who trust God enough to act with compassion;
and about the God who weaves their *hesed* into the great tapestry of redemption.

Boaz redeemed a family;

Christ redeems the world.

Boaz restored land and lineage;

Christ restores life.

Boaz acted with *hesed*;

Christ is God's *hesed* in human flesh.

In him, emptiness becomes fullness.

In him, sorrow yields to joy.

In him, strangers become part of God's own household.

Matthew begins his gospel by naming Ruth in the genealogy, along with other outsiders and unlikely figures, because the hope of the world does not come through perfect pedigrees or unbroken purity, but through God's grace working in real, complicated lives.

Ruth stands in a long biblical tradition where God's grace flows across the boundaries we draw. Israel kept stories of unexpected partnerships – of widows and prophets, strangers and servants – because they revealed a God who works through compassion rather than nationalism. Jesus later reminded his own listeners of these stories, and they were unsettled by them for the same reason: God's compassion is not confined to any one people. Grace has a way of overturning our assumptions about who belongs and who God can use.

Ruth's story ripens into Christ's story.

And Christ's story now ripens into ours.

Today is Harvest Sunday, and Ruth leads us to see harvest differently.

Harvest testifies that God's work often begins in the dark, in the hidden, in the quiet.

Harvest is what happens when small faithfulness becomes the place where God's grace grows.

Naomi endured.

Ruth clung.

Boaz acted with integrity.

Nothing spectacular.

Nothing showy.

Just steady *hesed* lived out in ordinary life.

And through those small, faithful acts, God brought forth the Redeemer.

It is no surprise that Ruth has been read for generations at Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, the Jewish festival that brings in the wheat harvest and remembers God's covenant at Sinai when Moses received the ten commandments. Ruth holds both movements together – it begins at the edge of the barley harvest and ends with arms full of grain; and at its heart lies a woman who freely chooses to live under the shelter of Israel's God. Her words, "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God," echo Sinai in miniature, it's a personal covenant spoken in loyalty and love.

Centuries later, the same festival reappears in the New Testament under its Greek name, Pentecost. Again, it is harvest-time, again it is covenant-time, but now God pours out the Holy Spirit on people from many nations. Pentecost becomes a new kind of harvest, not grain gathered into barns, but people gathered into Christ. The covenant widens, the family grows.

So, when Christians read Ruth, we read her story as one that leans forward, from Bethlehem's fields to Bethlehem's child, from a human redeemer to the Redeemer of the world, from *hesed* acted in small, ordinary ways to *hesed* fulfilled in Christ.

Harvest teaches us this rhythm:

God begins work long before we see it.

God uses people we might overlook.

God brings fullness out of emptiness, step by step, season by season.

And so we come from Ruth's field to Bethlehem's Child.

From gleaning to grace.

From the edges to the centre.

From famine to fullness.

From one woman's quiet faithfulness to the Redeemer who gathers the nations.

Ruth never saw the full reach of her story.

But God saw.

And Christ stands as the fullness of everything Ruth's faith set in motion.

Today, as we bring our gifts for harvest, we do not simply celebrate full cupboards and full tables.

We celebrate God whose faithfulness is patient and persistent, whose love moves quietly through ordinary people, whose redemption grows like grain beneath the soil.

We celebrate Christ, the true Redeemer, in whom the harvest of God's steadfast love comes to its fullness.

And so, with Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, and all God's people, we lift our voices with Psalm 100:

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving

and his courts with praise.

For the Lord is good;

his steadfast love endures for ever."

Amen