

## **God's hidden hand at work**

### **Ruth 2 & 3**

#### **A Faithful God**

#### **Introduction**

Have you ever thought, 'one person can't make much difference?' Trevor's social studies assignment was to come up with an idea that would change the world. But what difference could one 11 year old make? His idea? Pay it forward...

He would help three people in some act of kindness – do something for them they couldn't do for themselves. And they would simply pay it forward rather than seeking to pay him back. That's the plot of the film and Trevor's acts of kindness have ripple effects across the town, the state and the nation....

#### **Film Clip**

Pay it forward... It's just a Hollywood film. But it makes you think. Acts of loving kindness can make a difference, can have huge ripple effects beyond all expectations. Throughout the book of Ruth one word keeps recurring in the Hebrew – a word that means loving kindness. We'll see the huge impact of that loving kindness today in the lives of the various characters. We'll see that that loving kindness is itself an expression of God's love for his people. We'll see that loving kindness– God's kindness and the loving kindness of his people, changes things. And next week we'll see just how far the ripples of that kindness can travel.

#### **Act 1**

##### **In the field – the Kindness of Boaz (2:1-18)**

Remember last week? Ruth, a portrait of hope, and Naomi a portrait of despair. Both flowed from their view of God – so who's right? The first hint was 1:22 – the women returned at harvest time. And as we come to chapter 2 we find hope given more substance in the shape of Boaz.

Just look at the perfect timing. Naomi heads off to the fields to pick up the bits that the harvesters leave behind and look what happens.

v.3 As it turned out – of all the fields in Bethlehem she ends up in Boaz's

v.4 Then at just the right time Boaz arrives

v.5 Whose woman... Boaz notices this particular woman.

No coincidence – it's the hidden hand of God at work once more. He hasn't given up on Naomi and Ruth or his people.

Boaz stands out from the other men of the story – here is a man of faith – look at the first

*“My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay 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 is astonished by the kindness particularly because she’s a foreigner. Look onto v.13 *“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...”*

The law commanded Israelites to look after widows and foreigners. But in the time of Judges who cared about God’s law? Boaz. At lunch Ruth eats from his table (14). She asks why he’s doing it. Boaz has heard about how Ruth has been faithful to her mother. Verse 11

*“I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother in law... how you left your father and mother and your homeland to live with a people you did not know before...”*

It’s a wonderful picture, this woman who has showed such faithfulness, such loving kindness, given everything up for her mother in law, now finds herself on the receiving end of the same kind of loving kindness. There’s a trickle down effect of loving kindness. As it’s displayed here then it has consequences here. As I receive it from others then I want to share it with others and pass it on. It’s a great picture of what God’s people ought to look like...

Colossians 3 commands Christians to put on kindness. It may seem a weak word but see the transforming effect - people’s lives are changed. Tempting to think that I can’t do anything, I’m not very eloquent... I’m not an evangelist. But kindness is something all of us can clothe ourselves with. Galatians 6:10 says, *‘as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.’*

We must display this loving kindness to each other. Will guests at the Fun Day see it in how we relate to each other tomorrow? The opportunities may not seem as obvious to us as they were to Boaz or to Ruth because the needs are not so visible. But to those who are seeking to display loving kindness there are always opportunities.

The focus of that loving kindness is within the people of God – but it’s not exclusively so. Ruth was a Moabitess but Naomi and Boaz showed her this loving kindness.

God had always intended his people to be a blessing to the world, he promised Abraham they would be. But they failed comprehensively – yet here is just a glimmer of that blessing in Boaz. And through this man and his kindness the whole world would in time be blessed.

After lunch at Boaz’s table she returns to work and Boaz instructs his foreman in v.15 *“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.”*

obligation but by lavish generosity that puts someone else and their needs before our own. No surprise then that by the end of the day she has a massive 22 litres of barley – as much as she could carry and more than enough for her and her mother in law. But it's not just a sign of Boaz's kindness – it points beyond that to the God whom he served and his kindness.

## **Act 2**

### **Back at home – the Kindness of God (2:18-23)**

After a day in the field Ruth returns home to be quizzed by Naomi - she wonders where all the barley had come from. Verse 19 *“Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!”* And Ruth answers, *“The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz.”* To Ruth she's just a kind man, but we know better and so does Naomi...

*“The LORD bless him!” Naomi said to her daughter in law. The verse ought to read “The LORD has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead... that man one of our kinsman redeemers.”*

Naomi knows who stands behind every act of Boaz's kindness – the LORD has not stopped showing his kindness... And Naomi's spirits soar. She was full of bitterness and convinced that the LORD's hand was turned against her. But now she sees it's a hand of blessing.

His kindness is shown to the living – protection and provision for the present and the future. This man Boaz is a kinsman-redeemer. This meant more than just a relative, more like next of kin and under Israelite law he had special responsibilities. Leviticus 25 made special provision for Israelites who fell on hard times. Verse 25 says that *“If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what he has sold...”* so in buying the land Boaz would be able to provide income for Naomi and keep the land in the family. Along with the property Boaz would acquire Ruth and ensure that Elimelech's family line did not die out. But that's jumping ahead of the gun...

God is showing his loving kindness, his faithfulness to his people. He always does – Naomi had forgotten it and it led to despair, Ruth believed it though she could not see it, and it's now revealed through Boaz day after day. The writer of Lamentations says

*“The steadfast love (hesed) of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness..”*

So true isn't it? His mercies to us are new every morning – day after day after day. We so often take those mercies for granted... Above all we are able to thank him for the loving kindness shown to us in Jesus Christ...

We may forget his kindness in difficult days but the cross stands as a permanent display of his faithfulness and loving kindness. So everything looks great for Ruth and Naomi but then the harvest ends. What will happen now? Chapter 3 begins with Naomi asking Ruth, *“My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you where you will be well provided for?”* And act 3 will take us from the home to the threshing floor of Boaz’s farm.

### **Act 3**

#### **On the threshing floor – the action of faith (3:1-18)**

Remember what she said to her daughters-in-law back in 1:9? *“May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”* And she wasn’t afraid of a little match making to secure it. Verse 3

*“Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”*

What follows is full of intrigue and mystique to us because it’s not part of our culture. At least, not to my knowledge but let me know afterwards if this is how you proposed! Because that’s what it’s all about.

It’s is a bold move. With her Channel No 5 and best clothes she sets off. She startles Boaz in the middle of the night and says *“Spread the corner of your garment over me since you are a kinsman redeemer.”*

She won’t wait for Boaz to make the move – he might never get round to it. Not the first woman to think that! Remember Boaz’s words to Ruth back in chapter 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.”*

And now it’s as if Naomi says come on, take me under your wing, you provide for me and be the answer to your own prayer. Do you see what’s going on here? God in his providence has brought Ruth and Boaz together but they still have a part to play. He doesn’t act in a way that bypasses his people but in a way that draws them in.

My oldest brother once went to visit my sister when she was up at Durham. Everywhere they went that Saturday they seemed to bump into Caroline, Becca’s best friend. They all ended up having supper together. It seemed an extraordinary coincidence. But there was a hidden hand at work. My sister had told Caroline to meet her at various places in order to have several chances for her and Jonathan to meet each other. There was no chance or coincidence about Jonathan and Caroline meeting, just as there was no chance or coincidence about Ruth and Boaz meeting. A hidden hand was at work. But Jonathan and Caroline had their parts to play. Jonathan had to ask her out, and eventually to propose and

So it was with the players here. God was in control but they had to act in faith. Naomi had to trust that Boaz would obey God's law and fulfil his obligations, Ruth had to put her reputation, her dignity, safety and chastity on the line – he could so easily have taken advantage of her. And Boaz had to obey God's word.

And that's faith isn't it? Knowing that God is in control stepping out in action and getting on with life. Sometimes we'd love God to work his purposes out in the click of his fingers without having to use us at all. But faith, real faith is active not passive. God is sovereign, working his purposes out – but he does so through us, not by passing us. That's true of conversion, but true too in Christian living...

Remember what James says to his readers? *'What good is it my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. (as Ruth and Naomi were) If one of you says to him, "Go I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs what good is it? IN the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.'*

Boaz could have blessed Ruth and walked away. It would have looked and sounded very pious but it's hardly the loving kindness of faith is it? No instead he is willing to be the answer at least in part to his own prayer. Faith that worked by displaying loving kindness.

It's wonderful to see that faith at work amongst us ... There are many sitting here tonight who have experienced loving kindness from others in the church family. They've used their professional gifts, or their time, or practical ability to love you. And as they have you've experienced something more of God's love for you. And it's great isn't it! Wouldn't it be wonderful if this time next week more of us had experienced it? Well there's a simple solution – be someone who displays it!

## **Conclusion**

Trevor had as his motivation a Social Science assignment. How much greater is ours. We were saved by God's kindness to us in the Lord Jesus – the loving kindness of the Lord Jesus who gave his life for us, paying our debt to God, securing our freedom and a new start with God. We can never pay it back but we can pay it forward. And as new people, as Christians, we were created in Jesus to do good works. We can't pay him back but we can pay it forward.

God is controlling the circumstances of our lives, individually and together. Bringing people and situations into our lives in order that we might give and receive loving kindness and reflect to each other God's own character and his dealings with us. It was great to hear Angus testify to that at the AGM when speaking of his recent illness. But this loving kindness is not to characterise special occasions but all of life. And when we display it changes things, it changes lives. The loving kindness of Ruth and Boaz changed more than they could ever have understood. We'll see how next week. It reminds fellow Christians that God has not deserted them even in the midst of great hardship – he's expressing his love