

“Welcoming the Immigrant”
(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 69)

Ruth 2

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So Naomi returned to Israel after ten years in a foreign land, and her daughter-in-law Ruth chose to come with her. Ruth ... the Moabite.

The book of Ruth goes out of its way to keep reminding us that Ruth is a foreigner, a Moabite, one of the worst of the worst in Israel’s eyes, one of those people who were forever denied entry into the assembly of the Lord because of Israel’s long-standing enmity with Moab. The book is only four chapters long, yet the words “Ruth the Moabite” occurs five times in those four chapters – on average, once every 17 verses. Ruth can never get away from the fact that she is different. She has been labeled. She is not “Ruth.” She is “Ruth the Moabite.” She has left her own homeland to accompany her grieving and bitter mother-in-law to her own home back in Israel. But she will never be an Israelite, never become “part of the family,” despite the fact that she married into it. She is Ruth ... the Moabite.

To get the full import of that designation ... maybe we should think of her as Ruth the Afghan, or Ruth the Iraqi, or Ruth the Syrian. She was not a refugee, but – in Israel’s eyes – she *was* coming from the wrong part of the world. The *dangerous* part of the world.

How likely was it that she would be treated with respect? With any sort of human decency?

Israel did have certain laws that protected foreigners. In Deuteronomy the Israelites were told “you must also love immigrants because you were immigrants in Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 10.18-19) Specific laws follow that up: “Don’t take advantage of poor or needy workers, whether they are fellow Israelites or immigrants who live in your land” (Deuteronomy 24.14); “Don’t obstruct the legal rights of an immigrant or orphan” (Deuteronomy 24.17); “Whenever you are reaping the harvest of your field and you leave some grain in the field, don’t go back and get it. Let it go to the immigrants, the orphans, and the widows so that the LORD your God blesses you in all that you do.” (Deuteronomy 24.19)

Of course, just because something is a *law* doesn’t mean that everybody necessarily is going to *abide* by it. There was no guarantee that Ruth was going to be safe, or comfortable, or secure in this new land that she was going to try to call “home.”

The biggest concern at the moment was *sustenance*. Where were Naomi’s and Ruth’s meals

going to come from? Naomi was sitting around the house, overwhelmed by her own grief and bitterness and anger at God after the deaths of the three men she loved most. Ruth decides that if they're going to get food, *she's* going to get it. There are barley fields nearby. Ruth says to Naomi: "Let me go to the field so that I may glean among the ears of grain behind someone in whose eyes I might find favor." Naomi lifts up her head long enough to say: "Go, my daughter." (Ruth 2.2) Naomi does not bother to warn Ruth that the young men who work in the fields have a tendency of being, um, *handy* with the women. Ruth is heading out into danger – and Naomi is too overwhelmed to care.

So Ruth went out to the fields and, as was allowed by law, started to follow the fieldhands who were harvesting the crops, picking up anything that they left behind. The text says: "By chance, it happened to be the portion of the field that belonged to Boaz, who was from the family of Elimelech," Naomi's deceased husband. (Ruth 2.3) "By chance" ... that is, *by providence*. This wasn't just some *random* occurrence that Ruth went to this particular field. God is at work here, subtly, behind the scenes, orchestrating events to lead toward a particular conclusion. Naomi has completely given up on God, feels like God has utterly abandoned her – but there are divine designs at work here that Naomi has absolutely no knowledge of. When you've been through hell and you're angry and bitter at God and think he just doesn't *care* about you – think again. God might be *mightily* at work, behind the scenes.

Boaz, we are told, is a "respected" man, a "man of worth." (Ruth 2.1) He arrives at the field and greets his employees with the words, "May the LORD be with you," to which they respond: "May the LORD bless you." (Ruth 2.4) Boaz is a *believer*. He's running a faith-based operation out there in that field. He's a *good man*. He notices immediately that there's someone in the field he doesn't know. A woman. A foreigner. Boaz leans close to the young man who oversees the harvesters. "To whom does this woman belong?" he asks. "She's a young Moabite woman," the overseer replies, "the one who returned with Naomi from the territory of Moab." (Ruth 2.5) They exchange a few more words, then Boaz walks over to Ruth. She stops her gleaning to greet this important stranger – the man in whose hands now rests her fate. He speaks tenderly, even *paternally*, to her: "Haven't you understood, my daughter? Don't go glean in another field; don't go anywhere else. Instead, stay here with my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that they are harvesting and go along after them. I've ordered the young men not to assault you. Whenever you are thirsty, go to the jugs and drink from what the young men have filled." (Ruth 2.8-9) This hospitality surprises Ruth. All she hoped to do today was bring home some grain to help feed her mother-in-law. Now she's finding herself wrapped in an envelope of safety and nurture and care. Other fields might be unsafe for Ruth, but *this* field is *perfectly* safe. Boaz will see to that. Despite her status as an immigrant, a Moabite, Boaz is welcoming her into his fold.

She kneels down before him. "How is it that I've found favor in your eyes, that you notice? I'm an immigrant." He responds: "Everything that you did for your mother-in-law after your husband's death has been fully reported to me: how you left behind your father, your mother, and the land of your birth, and came to a people you hadn't known beforehand. May the LORD reward you for your deed. May you receive a rich reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you've come to seek refuge." She humbly thanks him for his gracious, merciful hospitality. (Ruth 2.10-13)

Later, when the fieldhands pause for lunch, Boaz invites Ruth to sit with his workers, makes sure

that she has bread to eat and vinegar to dip it in, and then he himself personally serves her roasted grain. She has plenty to eat; indeed, she's got leftovers. He tells her to take the leftovers home and share them with Naomi. As the afternoon shift begins, Boaz tells his workers to let her glean right behind them, to leave plenty for her to pick up easily, and to talk to her kindly. By the end of the day, Ruth has gathered an ephah of barley. That's a lot – about 21 quarts – enough to feed her and Naomi for nearly a week. When Ruth returns Naomi's house, her bounty is abundant enough to pull Naomi out of her funk. Naomi can tell: this was not an *ordinary* day in the fields. She looks at Ruth: "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? May the one who noticed you be blessed." (Ruth 2.19) Ruth replies: "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." (Ruth 2.20) Naomi's eyes widen even further. How could it be that fortune would have sent Ruth *there*? "This man is one of our close relatives," Naomi explains; "he's one of our redeemers." (Ruth 2.21) Israelites were expected to care for the well-being of the members of their extended family, especially when there has been severe misfortune, like poverty or slavery or murder. Those people who were closest in lineage to the suffering members of the family were called the "redeemers" – the ones who were expected to do their best to set things right. Boaz wasn't the first in the line of redeemers – but he was part of that wider circle.

The news that Boaz looked out for Ruth fills Naomi with joy – the first real joy she's felt in a *long* time. Her despair suddenly gives way to hope. Her anger at God turns into rejoicing. In a moment, in an instant, *everything* has changed, and she now knows that everything is going to turn out okay. Her faith returns. "May he be blessed by the LORD," Naomi exclaims, "who hasn't abandoned his faithfulness with the living or with the dead." (Ruth 2.21) In the last chapter she had given up on God, because she thought God had given up on her. Now she knows: *God doesn't abandon his faithfulness.*

There are a couple lessons here. One is the truth that Naomi just realized: *God doesn't abandon his faithfulness.* Even when tragedy strikes, even when you're overwhelmed by grief, even when the whole world is in reeling by news of death and destruction and violence, *there is still a God who is faithful.* Sometimes look so bad that we feel like giving up hope. Stories like this remind us: *God is faithful.* Always faithful, always sure – and always looking for ways to bring good out of suffering.

The other lesson has to do with the way Boaz chose to treat this newcomer, this foreigner, this immigrant on his property. When he saw Ruth, he did not know who she was. He could have just let her glean behind his workers as the law required, and not asked any questions. He could have let her be ridiculed or "handled" by his men. He could have disregarded the law and kicked her off his land. But he chose differently. He chose to ask one very important question: *Who is she?* In Ruth's case, it turns out that she was related to one of his relatives, and that caused a change in the way the story turns out, but the point is that he bothered to ask the question in the first place. *Who is she?* He took an interest in her as a *person*. He could have just *tolerated* her presence on his land. Instead he asked: *Who is she?*

Every immigrant has a name, a story, an identity, a reason why they chose to leave their country of origin and make a new home elsewhere, whether they are Irish potato farmers or Vietnamese boat people or Syrian refugees. Don't just pass off an immigrant "one of *those* people." Ask the question: *Who are you?* Or: *Tell me your story.* Treat them as the *human* that they really are.