Ruth

Bible Stories Anthology — Ruth 1–4

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

Under His Wings

A widow walks into Bethlehem at the start of the barley harvest. She is bitter, she is poor, and she tells the women of the town not to call her by her own name any more. Beside her walks a younger widow — a foreigner, from a nation Israel had every reason to distrust — who has sworn never to leave her.

Four short chapters later, the bitter widow is holding a grandson in her lap. The foreigner is married to one of the most respected men in town. And the baby's name has been written into the line that leads to King David — and, a thousand years later, to Jesus Christ, born in that same town of Bethlehem.

The book of Ruth has no battles and no miracles. Nobody parts a sea or calls down fire. It is a story about two women, a field of barley, a threshing floor at midnight, and a meeting at the town gate. God is never seen and never speaks in it. And yet His hand is on every page. It is the loveliest story in the Old Testament, and one of the clearest pictures in it of redemption — of a Redeemer who is a near kinsman, who is able, and who is willing.

The Setting

When. "In the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1) — the long, dark period between Joshua's conquest of the land and the first king of Israel, roughly three hundred years. The book of Judges sums up those days in its last sentence: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Ruth is the story of a few people who did what was right in God's eyes, in an age when almost nobody did.

Where. It begins and ends in Bethlehem of Judah, a small town in the hills about six miles south of Jerusalem. Its name means *house of bread*; its older name, Ephratah, means *fruitful*. In between, the story goes east across the Jordan and the Dead Sea to the country of Moab, a high plateau of fields and pasture.

Who. Elimelech, a man of Bethlehem; his wife Naomi; their sons Mahlon and Chilion; two Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, who married the sons; Boaz, a wealthy relative of Elimelech; an unnamed nearer relative; the elders and women of Bethlehem; and the LORD God.

The situation. This is the **Mosaic Law administration**. An **administration** is a period in which God deals with mankind on a particular basis. Since Sinai, Israel had lived under the covenant of the Law, and the Law shapes every turn of this story: its provision for the poor at harvest, its laws about redeeming a relative's land, and its law about raising up a son for a man who died childless. It is a story of grace working through the Law's own provisions.

And there is a shadow over it from the first verse. Ruth is a *Moabite*. The Moabites were descended from Lot's son by his own daughter (Genesis 19:36-37). When Israel came out of Egypt, Moab's king hired the prophet Balaam to curse them (Numbers 22:4-6), and the Law said: "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation" (Deuteronomy 23:3). If anyone was an outsider in Israel, it was a woman from Moab.

The Story, Told Faithfully

Leaving the House of Bread

> **Ruth 1:1** *Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Beth-lehem-judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.*
>
> **Ruth 1:2** *And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Beth-lehem-judah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there.*

A famine in the *house of bread*. That alone tells the reader something is wrong. Under the covenant of the Law, God had promised Israel rain and harvest for obedience, and warned of famine for turning away (Deuteronomy 28:23-24). In the days of the judges, Israel turned away again and again.

In the East, names carried meaning, and the names here are worth knowing. *Elimelech* means *my God is king* — a fine name in an age with no king. *Naomi* means *pleasant*. The sons' names are harder to translate with certainty, but they seem to be connected with words for *sickness* and *wasting away* — names that read, in hindsight, like a warning.

Elimelech meant to "sojourn" — to stay for a while as a foreigner. They "continued there." A short stay became a long one.

> **Ruth 1:3** *And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons.*
>
> **Ruth 1:4** *And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth: and they dwelled there about ten years.*

> **Ruth 1:5** *And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.*

Three funerals in five verses. First her husband, then — ten years into the stay — both of her sons, neither of whom left a child. Twice the text says the same thing of Naomi: "she was left." In that world, a widow with no sons had no one to farm the land, no one to carry the family name, and no one to provide for her in old age. Naomi had gone to Moab to escape a famine. She had lost everything else instead.

Turning Home

> **Ruth 1:6** *Then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that the LORD had visited his people in giving them bread.*

"The LORD had visited his people in giving them bread." God had put bread back in the house of bread. The word "return" (*shuv*) appears again and again in this chapter. It is the same Hebrew word the prophets use for *repentance*: turning back to God. Naomi was going home.

Her two daughters-in-law set out with her. Somewhere on the road, Naomi stopped and told them to go back.

> **Ruth 1:8** *And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother's house: the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.*
>
> **Ruth 1:9** *The LORD grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.*

"The LORD deal kindly with you." The word "kindly" is *chesed*, one of the richest words in the Old Testament. It means loyal love, faithful kindness — the kind of love that keeps its commitments. Hold on to that word. It is what this whole book is about.

"That ye may find rest." *Rest* here means a settled home, security, a husband's house. Naomi wanted the young women to have what she could no longer give them.

> **Ruth 1:11** *And Naomi said, Turn again, my daughters: why will ye go with me? are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?*
>
> **Ruth 1:12** *Turn again, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have an husband. If I should say, I have hope, if I should have an husband also to night, and should also bear sons;*
>
> **Ruth 1:13** *Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them from having husbands? nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD is gone out against me.*

Naomi was referring to a custom God later wrote into the Law: when a man died without a son, his brother was to marry the widow, and the first son born would carry on the dead man's name (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). Naomi was saying: I have no more sons to give you, and even if I did, you could not wait twenty years for them to grow up.

This is a figure of speech — a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used to add emphasis or feeling. Naomi asks one question after another, not to get answers but to make a point: "why will ye go with me? are there yet any more sons in my womb?… Would ye tarry for them?"

This is called **erotesis**, asking questions to press home what the speaker already knows. Every question has the same answer: there is no future for you with me.

“The hand of the LORD is gone out against me.” This is how Naomi saw her life. Scripture records her words honestly, the way it records Job’s. It does not tell us they were God’s verdict on her. It tells us they were her grief. By the end of this book, the same women who heard her say this will be saying something very different: “Blessed be the LORD, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman” (4:14).

Ruth Clave to Her

> **Ruth 1:14** *And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her.*

Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye and went home. Scripture does not condemn her for it. She did what was sensible, and what Naomi urged.

“But Ruth clave unto her.” The Hebrew verb is *dabaq*, to cling, to stick fast, to be joined. It is the word Genesis uses of marriage: a man “shall cleave unto his wife” (Genesis 2:24). Ruth held on to Naomi the way a wife holds on to her husband.

> **Ruth 1:15** *And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law.*
> **Ruth 1:16** *And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:*
> **Ruth 1:17** *Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.*

“Unto her gods.” Naomi put the choice in its real terms. To go back to Moab was to go back to Chemosh, the god of Moab. To go on to Bethlehem was to go to the LORD.

And Ruth chose. Her answer is one of the most famous sentences in the Bible, and it is a vow in five parts: where you go, I go; where you lodge, I lodge; your people, my people; your God, my God; where you die, I die and am buried. It covers the road, the home, the nation, the faith and the grave — everything a person can give.

“Thy God my God.” This is the centre of it. Ruth was not only choosing a mother-in-law. She was choosing the God of Israel. Notice that she swears by His name: “the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.” That was a solemn oath formula in Hebrew, an **idiom** — an expression whose meaning is found in the way a people used it rather than in its separate words. It means: *may God punish me severely if I break this vow.* A woman of Moab was calling on the LORD, the God of Israel, as her witness.

Call Me Mara

> **Ruth 1:19** *So they two went until they came to Beth-lehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Beth-lehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi?*

> **Ruth 1:20** *And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.*
>
> **Ruth 1:21** *I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?*

"Is this Naomi?" Ten years of grief had changed her so much the women hardly knew her.

"Call me Mara." *Naomi* means *pleasant*; *Mara* means *bitter*. She renamed herself after her pain. "I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty." Remember that word *empty*. It will come back.

Again, the story lets her say it without correcting her. It is the honest cry of a grieving woman. But look at what she could not see. She said she came home empty — and a Moabite woman who loved her more than her own life was standing right beside her.

> **Ruth 1:22** *So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Beth-lehem in the beginning of barley harvest.*

"The beginning of barley harvest." Barley ripened first, in the spring, around the time of Passover. The wheat followed some weeks later, ending around the Feast of Weeks, which the New Testament calls Pentecost. They came home, empty, at the season when God was filling the fields.

Her Hap Was to Light

> **Ruth 2:1** *And Naomi had a kinsman of her husband's, a mighty man of wealth, of the family of Elimelech; and his name was Boaz.*

Before Ruth does anything, the narrator lets the reader in on something she does not know. There is a relative. A "mighty man of wealth" — in Hebrew, *gibbor chayil*, a man of strength, substance and standing. Remember that word *chayil*.

> **Ruth 2:2** *And Ruth the Moabitess said unto Naomi, Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace. And she said unto her, Go, my daughter.*

Here we need to fill in a blank, because this is one of the kindest laws God ever gave. When Israel harvested, they were not to reap the corners of their fields, or go back for what they missed:

> **Leviticus 19:9** *And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest.*
>
> **Leviticus 19:10** *...thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the LORD your God.*
>
> **Deuteronomy 24:19** *When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow...*

"The poor and stranger... the fatherless, and... the widow." Ruth was all of those at once. God had written provision for her into His Law centuries before she was born. But gleaning was hard, hot, humble work, and not every landowner welcomed it — Ruth hoped to find someone "in whose sight I shall find grace."

> **Ruth 2:3** *And she went, and came, and gleaned in the field after the reapers: and her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech.*

"Her hap was to light." In Hebrew this is a play on one word: *her chance chanced*. The same root is used twice, as a verb and a noun. This is a figure of speech called **polyptoton** — the same word repeated in different forms for emphasis. And the emphasis here is full of quiet irony. From Ruth's point of view, it just happened. She walked out into the patchwork of unfenced strips of field around Bethlehem and started gleaning in the first one that would have her. From the reader's point of view, it was anything but chance. Of all the fields in Bethlehem, she came to the one belonging to the one man who could redeem her family. Scripture never says "God led her there." It does not need to.

Boaz

> **Ruth 2:4** *And, behold, Boaz came from Beth-lehem, and said unto the reapers, The LORD be with you. And they answered him, The LORD bless thee.*

The first words out of Boaz's mouth are a blessing on his workers, and they answer him with one. That is what kind of man he was — in the days when every man did what was right in his own eyes.

> **Ruth 2:5** *Then said Boaz unto his servant that was set over the reapers, Whose damsel is this?*
> **Ruth 2:6** *And the servant that was set over the reapers answered and said, It is the Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab:*
> **Ruth 2:7** *And she said, I pray you, let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves: so she came, and hath continued even from the morning until now, that she tarried a little in the house.*

"Whose damsel is this?" — in that culture, a way of asking who she belonged to, which family she was from. The foreman's answer is careful: she is "the Moabitish damsel." Twice in one sentence he mentions Moab. And then he adds: she asked permission, she has worked since morning, and she has barely rested.

> **Ruth 2:8** *Then said Boaz unto Ruth, Hearest thou not, my daughter? Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens:*
> **Ruth 2:9** *Let thine eyes be on the field that they do reap, and go thou after them: have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee? and when thou art athirst, go unto the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn.*

Boaz gave her four things. **A place**: stay in my field. **Company**: stay close to my women workers. **Protection**: "have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee?" — a young foreign widow, alone among harvest crews, was in real danger, and Boaz knew it. And **water**: drink from what my men have drawn. In that culture, a foreigner drawing water for Israelites would have been expected. Here the Israelites drew water for the foreigner.

"Abide here fast" is the same Hebrew word *dabaq* — cling, cleave — that described Ruth clinging to Naomi. Ruth had clung to Naomi. Now Boaz invited her to cling to his household.

> **Ruth 2:10** *Then she fell on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, and said unto him, Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldest take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger?*

“Why have I found grace?” There is a play on words in the Hebrew that English cannot show: “that thou shouldest *take knowledge of* me” (*nakar*) and “seeing I am a *stranger*” (*nokri*) come from the same root. Why would you *notice* me, when I am the one people *don’t* notice? Ruth asked the question every person asks who meets grace for the first time: why me?

Under Whose Wings

> **Ruth 2:11** *And Boaz answered and said unto her, It hath fully been shewed me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother in law since the death of thine husband: and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people which thou knewest not heretofore.*
>
> **Ruth 2:12** *The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.*

Word had got around Bethlehem. Boaz knew what she had given up: father, mother, homeland. Like Abraham, who left “thy country, and… thy kindred, and… thy father’s house” (Genesis 12:1), she had gone out to a land she did not know.

“Under whose wings thou art come to trust.” This is a **metaphor** — a figure of speech that speaks of one thing as though it were another. God is pictured as a great bird, and Ruth as a chick that has run to shelter under its wings. The psalmist uses the same picture: “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust” (Psalm 91:4). And Jesus used it too, weeping over Jerusalem: “how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings” (Matthew 23:37). Ruth, a woman from Moab, had come to shelter under the wings of the God of Israel.

The Hebrew word for “wings” is *kanaph*. Remember it. It is about to come back in a place no one expects.

More Than She Asked

> **Ruth 2:14** *And Boaz said unto her, At mealtime come thou hither, and eat of the bread, and dip thy morsel in the vinegar. And she sat beside the reapers: and he reached her parched corn, and she did eat, and was sufficed, and left.*

At the midday meal, Boaz invited the Moabite gleaner to sit with his workers and eat. The “vinegar” was sour wine, used as a dip for bread; “parched corn” was roasted grain, a staple of the harvest field. Boaz served her with his own hand. And she ate until she “was sufficed, and left” — more than enough, with some to spare, which she saved and took home to Naomi (2:18).

> **Ruth 2:15** *And when she was risen up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying, Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not:*
>
> **Ruth 2:16** *And let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not.*

The Law required leaving the corners and the forgotten stalks. Boaz went far beyond it. Let her glean among the sheaves themselves, where gleaners were not normally allowed. And more: pull stalks out of your bundles *on purpose*, and drop them where she will find them. Ruth thought she was gleaning. In fact she was being provided for, handful by handful, by a man she barely knew — and she did not know it. That is grace: more than what was owed, given in ways the one receiving it does not even see.

> **Ruth 2:17** *So she gleaned in the field until even, and beat out that she had gleaned: and it was about an ephah of barley.*

An **ephah** was a dry measure, commonly estimated at around three-fifths of a bushel — perhaps thirty pounds of barley, from one day's gleaning. Gleaners usually went home with a little. Ruth came home with enough grain to feed two women for weeks.

"One of Our Next Kinsmen"

> **Ruth 2:19** *And her mother in law said unto her, Where hast thou gleaned to day? and where wroughtest thou? blessed be he that did take knowledge of thee. And she shewed her mother in law with whom she had wrought, and said, The man's name with whom I wrought to day is Boaz.*
>
> **Ruth 2:20** *And Naomi said unto her daughter in law, Blessed be he of the LORD, who hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead. And Naomi said unto her, The man is near of kin unto us, one of our next kinsmen.*

Naomi saw the ephah of barley and knew someone had been generous. When she heard the name, everything changed. "Blessed be he of the LORD, who hath not left off his kindness" — *chesed* again, the loyal love she thought had run out. The woman who had said "call me Mara" was blessing the LORD.

"One of our next kinsmen." The Hebrew word is *go'el* — a **kinsman-redeemer**. This is the key word of the whole book, and it needs to be explained. Under the Law, a *go'el* was the nearest male relative who had the right and the duty to act for a family in trouble:

> **Leviticus 25:25** *If thy brother be waxen poor, and hath sold away some of his possession, and if any of his kin come to redeem it, then shall he redeem that which his brother sold.*

If a man fell into poverty and had to sell his land, his near kinsman could buy it back for the family. If a man sold himself into slavery, his kinsman could buy him out (Leviticus 25:47-49). The kinsman-redeemer's whole purpose was to restore what his relative had lost. Elimelech's land in Bethlehem had passed out of the family's hands. Boaz was one of the men with the right to buy it back.

> **Ruth 2:23** *So she kept fast by the maidens of Boaz to glean unto the end of barley harvest and of wheat harvest; and dwelt with her mother in law.*

Through the barley harvest and on through the wheat — about seven weeks, from the season of Passover to the season of Pentecost — Ruth gleaned in Boaz's field. (Jewish tradition still reads the book of Ruth at the Feast of Weeks, the Pentecost of the harvest.) Seven weeks, and Boaz had done nothing more. The harvest was ending. If anything was going to change, someone would have to act.

The Threshing Floor

> **Ruth 3:1** *Then Naomi her mother in law said unto her, My daughter, shall I not seek rest for thee, that it may be well with thee?*
>
> **Ruth 3:2** *And now is not Boaz of our kindred, with whose maidens thou wast? Behold, he winnoweth barley to night in the threshingfloor.*

"Shall I not seek rest for thee?" On the road from Moab, Naomi had prayed that each of her daughters-in-law would "find rest… in the house of her husband" (1:9). Now she set out to make it happen.

The **threshing floor** was a flat, hard open space, usually on a rise where the evening wind blew. After the grain was threshed, it was winnowed: thrown into the air with a fork, so the wind carried off the light chaff and the heavy grain fell back. The breeze was best in the evening, and at harvest the owners slept on the threshing floor beside their grain to guard it. It was not a respectable place for a woman at night; the prophet Hosea mentions harlots who "loved a reward upon every cornfloor" (Hosea 9:1). Naomi was sending Ruth into a place where her reputation could be destroyed.

> **Ruth 3:3** *Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee, and get thee down to the floor: but make not thyself known unto the man, until he shall have done eating and drinking.*
>
> **Ruth 3:4** *And it shall be, when he lieth down, that thou shalt mark the place where he shall lie, and thou shalt go in, and uncover his feet, and lay thee down; and he will tell thee what thou shalt do.*

Bathe, put on perfumed oil, put on your best garment — some think this means taking off the clothing of mourning a widow wore. And then: "uncover his feet, and lay thee down."

This scene has to be faced honestly, because readers have understood it in very different ways. In Hebrew, "feet" is sometimes used as a polite, indirect word for private parts — a **euphemism**, a mild expression put in place of something more direct (for example, Isaiah 7:20 speaks of shaving "the hair of the feet"). And the whole setting — night, a threshing floor, a man who has eaten and drunk, a woman who has bathed and perfumed herself — is charged. Some readers have concluded that Ruth offered herself to Boaz that night.

The text does not say that, and the words it uses point the other way. The word used here for "feet" is not the ordinary one. It is *margelot*, "the place of the feet," the area at his feet — used only in this chapter and once in Daniel 10:6, where it clearly means the legs and feet. Ruth uncovered the place at his feet and lay down there. And everything that follows shows that nothing improper happened. Boaz calls her "a virtuous woman" (3:11). He tells her to lie there until morning, and then sends her away before anyone can recognize her, "Let it not be known that a woman came into the floor" (3:14) — protecting her name, not hiding a sin. And the next morning he goes straight to the town gate to settle the matter lawfully.

What Ruth did was bold, and it was risky. It was a proposal of marriage, made in the only way available to a poor widow with no father or brother to speak for her. She put herself at his feet, where a servant lies, and waited for him to wake.

> **Ruth 3:7** *And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn: and she came softly, and uncovered his feet, and laid her down.*
>
> **Ruth 3:8** *And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was afraid, and turned himself: and, behold, a woman lay at his feet.*

"His heart was merry" — well-fed and content at the end of a good harvest. At midnight, he woke with a start — perhaps from the cold on his uncovered feet — turned over, and found a woman lying there in the dark.

Spread Thy Skirt

> **Ruth 3:9** *And he said, Who art thou? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman.*

"Who art thou?" Here, alone, in the dark, Ruth does not call herself "the Moabitess" or "a stranger." She says, "I am Ruth thine handmaid" — and the word she uses for handmaid is the one for a woman who could be a wife.

"Spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid." Here is the word *kanaph* again — the same word Boaz had used for God's *wings* (2:12). The "skirt" is the corner or wing of his cloak. To spread the corner of one's garment over a woman was an Eastern way of saying *I take you as my wife, under my protection*. God uses the very same words of His covenant with Israel: "I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine" (Ezekiel 16:8).

Do you see what Ruth did? Weeks earlier, Boaz had blessed her: may the LORD reward you, "under whose *wings* thou art come to trust." Now Ruth says to him: *then spread your wing over me*. Be the answer to your own prayer. You asked God to shelter me under His wings — you be the one He does it through.

"For thou art a near kinsman" — *go'el*, kinsman-redeemer. Ruth was not asking only for a husband. She was asking Boaz to redeem the whole family: to marry her, raise up a son for Mahlon, and buy back Elimelech's land.

A Virtuous Woman

> **Ruth 3:10** *And he said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my daughter: for thou hast shewed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich.*
>
> **Ruth 3:11** *And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman.*

Boaz was older — he calls her "my daughter" — and he was astonished she had come to him. "More kindness in the latter end than at the beginning." *Chesed* again. Her first kindness was to Naomi. This latest one was to her dead husband's family: instead of looking for a young man to marry, rich or poor — a figure that names two opposites to include everyone, called **merism** — she chose the man who could redeem Elimelech's name.

"All the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman." In Hebrew, *eshet chayil*, a woman of strength, worth and noble character. Boaz was a *gibbor chayil* (2:1); Ruth was an *eshet chayil*. They were matched. It is the same phrase that opens the famous passage in Proverbs: "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies" (Proverbs 31:10). In some ancient Hebrew manuscripts, the book of Ruth comes directly after Proverbs — as though to say: here she is.

> **Ruth 3:12** *And now it is true that I am thy near kinsman: howbeit there is a kinsman nearer than I.*
>
> **Ruth 3:13** *Tarry this night, and it shall be in the morning, that if he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman, well; let him do the kinsman's part: but if he will not do the part of a kinsman to thee, then will I do the part of a kinsman to thee, as the LORD liveth: lie down until the morning.*

There was a problem. Another man was a closer relative, and the right of redemption belonged to him first. Boaz would not go around the Law. But he swore — "as the LORD liveth" — that if the other man would not act, he would.

> **Ruth 3:14** *And she lay at his feet until the morning: and she rose up before one could know another. And he said, Let it not be known that a woman came into the floor.*
> **Ruth 3:15** *Also he said, Bring the vail that thou hast upon thee, and hold it. And when she held it, he measured six measures of barley, and laid it on her: and she went into the city.*

Before dawn, while it was still too dark to recognize a face, he sent her home with her shawl full of barley. He protected her reputation, and he did not send her away empty-handed.

> **Ruth 3:17** *And she said, These six measures of barley gave he me; for he said to me, Go not empty unto thy mother in law.*
> **Ruth 3:18** *Then said she, Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall: for the man will not be in rest, until he have finished the thing this day.*

"Go not *empty*." It is the same Hebrew word Naomi had used in her grief: "the LORD hath brought me home again *empty*" (1:21). Boaz did not know she had said it. But God did. The barley was a message to Naomi: your emptiness is about to end.

"The man will not be in rest, until he have finished the thing this day." Naomi had set out to find *rest* for Ruth (3:1). Now the man who would give it to her would have no rest himself until it was done.

At the Gate

> **Ruth 4:1** *Then went Boaz up to the gate, and sat him down there: and, behold, the kinsman of whom Boaz spake came by; unto whom he said, Ho, such a one! turn aside, sit down here. And he turned aside, and sat down.*
> **Ruth 4:2** *And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, Sit ye down here. And they sat down.*

The **city gate** was the town's courthouse, marketplace and council chamber. The elders sat there, and legal business was done there in public, before witnesses. Boaz sat down at the gate, and — "behold" — the very man he needed came walking by.

"Ho, such a one!" The Hebrew is something like *Mr. So-and-so*. The narrator deliberately does not give the man's name. He was the man who could have redeemed Ruth, and would not — and scripture let his name be forgotten.

> **Ruth 4:3** *And he said unto the kinsman, Naomi, that is come again out of the country of Moab, selleth a parcel of land, which was our brother Elimelech's:*
> **Ruth 4:4** *...If thou wilt redeem it, redeem it: but if thou wilt not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know: for there is none to redeem it beside thee; and I am after thee. And he said, I will redeem it.*

Boaz began with the land. Naomi, as Elimelech's widow, had the right to sell his land, and the nearer kinsman had the first right to buy it. A field for sale, with no heirs to claim it back — the man said yes at once. It looked like a good investment.

> **Ruth 4:5** *Then said Boaz, What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy it also of Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance.*
>
> **Ruth 4:6** *And the kinsman said, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I mar mine own inheritance: redeem thou my right to thyself; for I cannot redeem it.*

Then Boaz added the rest. The field came with a widow. Whoever bought it must also marry Ruth, "to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance." That phrase — "raise up the name of the dead" — is an idiom for giving a dead man descendants to carry on his family and inherit his land. The first son of the marriage would be counted as Mahlon's son, and the field would go to him.

Suddenly the investment was not so good. The man would pay for the land, support a wife and children — and then watch the land pass to a son who legally belonged to someone else's line. "Lest I mar mine own inheritance." He was able. He was not willing. He was not prepared to lose anything of his own to redeem someone else.

The Shoe

> **Ruth 4:7** *Now this was the manner in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbour: and this was a testimony in Israel.*
>
> **Ruth 4:8** *Therefore the kinsman said unto Boaz, Buy it for thee. So he drew off his shoe.*

The narrator stops to explain an old custom, which tells us the book was written some time after these events, when readers needed it explained. Handing over a sandal was a way of sealing a transfer of property, like signing a deed. The sandal stood for walking on land and claiming it; a psalm speaks of God casting out His shoe over Edom to claim it as His own (Psalm 60:8). The nearer kinsman took off his sandal and handed his right of redemption to Boaz.

(This is not quite the same as the shoe ceremony of Deuteronomy 25:9, in which a widow publicly pulled off the sandal of a brother-in-law who refused to marry her and spat in his face. That was a shaming. Here, the sandal simply sealed a transfer — though the man who would not redeem is still left without a name.)

> **Ruth 4:9** *And Boaz said unto the elders, and unto all the people, Ye are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi.*
>
> **Ruth 4:10** *Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place: ye are witnesses this day.*

"Ye are witnesses this day." Boaz did it all in the open, lawfully, before the elders and all the people. He bought back everything that had been lost — the land, the family name — and took the Moabite widow as his wife. Everything that was his, he put at risk for the dead man's family.

Like Rachel and Like Leah

> **Ruth 4:11** *And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said, We are witnesses. The LORD make the woman that is come into thine house like Rachel and like Leah, which two did build the house of Israel: and do thou worthily in Ephratah, and be famous in Beth-lehem:*

> **Ruth 4:12** *And let thy house be like the house of Pharez, whom Tamar bare unto Judah, of the seed which the LORD shall give thee of this young woman.*

The whole town blessed the marriage. And look at whom they compared Ruth to. First Rachel and Leah, the mothers of Israel's twelve tribes. A woman of Moab, blessed to be like the mothers of the nation. Then Tamar, the widow who was wronged by Judah and bore Pharez — Boaz's own ancestor (Genesis 38). Tamar too was an outsider, a widow, who secured her place in the line of Judah by a bold act, and the blessing remembers her with honour.

A Son Born to Naomi

> **Ruth 4:13** *So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the LORD gave her conception, and she bare a son.*

"The LORD gave her conception." Ruth had been married to Mahlon for about ten years with no child. Now God gave her a son. It is one of only two places in the whole book where the narrator himself says the LORD did something directly — the first was when He "visited his people in giving them bread" (1:6). Bread for the house of bread, and a son for the house of Elimelech.

> **Ruth 4:14** *And the women said unto Naomi, Blessed be the LORD, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel.*
> **Ruth 4:15** *And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him.*
> **Ruth 4:16** *And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it.*

The same women who had heard Naomi say, "call me Mara… the LORD hath brought me home again empty," now say, "Blessed be the LORD." The child would be "a restorer of thy life" — literally, one who *brings your life back*, using the same Hebrew word *shuv*, "return," that ran through chapter 1. Naomi had returned to Bethlehem. Now God had returned her life to her.

"Thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons." In Israel, seven sons was the picture of a complete and perfect family. The women told Naomi: the Moabite who loves you is worth more than that. Naomi had said she came home empty. She had come home with Ruth.

And Naomi took the baby in her arms. The woman who had been left without husband or sons was holding a grandson.

> **Ruth 4:17** *And the women her neighbours gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi; and they called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

Obed means *servant* — or *worshipper*, one who serves God. And then, in the last line of the story, the reason it was written: "he is the father of Jesse, the father of David."

The Generations of Pharez

> **Ruth 4:18** *Now these are the generations of Pharez: Pharez begat Hezron,*
> **Ruth 4:19** *And Hezron begat Ram, and Ram begat Amminadab,*
> **Ruth 4:20** *And Amminadab begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salmon,*
> **Ruth 4:21** *And Salmon begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed,*

> **Ruth 4:22** *And Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.*

The book ends with ten names, from Pharez, the son of Judah and Tamar, down to David, the king. A story that began "in the days when… there was no king in Israel" ends with the name of Israel's greatest king.

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus Christ adds one more detail the book of Ruth leaves out: "Salmon begat Booz of Rachab; and Booz begat Obed of Ruth" (Matthew 1:5). Boaz's mother was Rahab — the woman of Jericho who hid Israel's spies and was saved by faith (Joshua 2; Hebrews 11:31). A Canaanite mother and a Moabite wife. No wonder Boaz knew how to be kind to a stranger.

As for the Law's ban on Moabites entering "the congregation of the LORD… to their tenth generation" (Deuteronomy 23:3): the Law gave its reason — Moab refused Israel bread and water in the wilderness and hired Balaam to curse them (23:4). Ruth had done the very opposite. She brought bread home to an Israelite widow and blessed Israel's God. Jewish teachers later ruled that the ban applied to Moabite men and not to Moabite women. Scripture itself does not stop to explain. It simply shows a woman of Moab, sheltering under the wings of the God of Israel, welcomed at the gate, blessed by the elders, and placed by God in the line of David and of Christ.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The Kinsman-Redeemer. Boaz is one of the clearest pictures in scripture of what Jesus Christ is to those He redeems. Under the Law, a kinsman-redeemer had to be three things, and Boaz was all three:

- **A near kinsman.** Only a relative could redeem. To redeem mankind, the Redeemer had to become one of us: "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same… Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren" (Hebrews 2:14, 17). "God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law" (Galatians 4:4-5).
- **Able to pay.** Boaz was "a mighty man of wealth." The price of our redemption was higher than any wealth: "ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold… But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19).
- **Willing.** The nearer kinsman was able, but unwilling to mar his own inheritance. Boaz was willing to spend his own. Christ "gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity" (Titus 2:14).

Bethlehem. The story begins and ends in Bethlehem, the house of bread. There David was born. And the prophet foretold that from that little town a ruler would come: "thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel" (Micah 5:2). A thousand years after Ruth, Joseph went "unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)" (Luke 2:4), and in Boaz's town, Mary gave birth to the Son of David — the One who said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).

Grace in the genealogy. Matthew names only four women in the genealogy of Jesus Christ before Mary: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "her that had been the wife of Urias" (Matthew 1:3, 5, 6). A wronged widow who took a desperate step; a Canaanite harlot saved by faith; a Moabite widow; and a woman taken in David's sin. The Messiah's own family tree is a record of grace.

Redemption completed. Boaz redeemed the land and the family at the gate. Christ's redemption was completed by His death, His resurrection, and His ascension to God's right hand, from where He will come again. What Boaz did for one family in Bethlehem, Christ has done for all who believe.

To the Grace Administration

Strangers brought in. Ruth was an outsider in every way — a foreigner, a widow, a Moabite, barred by law from the congregation. That was the condition of the Gentiles before Christ: "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:12-13). "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19). Under grace, there is not even a gate to wait at: "There is neither Jew nor Greek… for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29).

"Why have I found grace?" Ruth asked the question every believer asks. The answer is the same for us as for her: not because of who we were, but because of who the Redeemer is. And like Ruth, we are provided for in more ways than we ever see — handfuls dropped on purpose, day after day. "My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

From empty to full. Naomi went out full and came home empty, and blamed God for it. By the end, God had restored her life. Nothing a believer loses is beyond God's restoring. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28).

Chosen by grace, not by standing. God chose a Moabite widow to be the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king. "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise… and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen… That no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

To the Topic of Loyal Love

The Hebrew word *chesed* — loyal love, faithful kindness — runs through the whole book:

- **Ruth's *chesed* to Naomi**: she clung to her when she had every reason to leave.
- **Boaz's *chesed* to Ruth**: he protected her, fed her, provided for her in secret, guarded her reputation, and redeemed her.
- **Ruth's *chesed* to the dead**: she chose the man who could raise up her husband's name, rather than a young man of her own choosing.
- **God's *chesed* to them all**: unseen, unmentioned most of the time, and behind every "chance."

Loyal love keeps its word when it costs something. That is what Ruth did on the road from Moab, what Boaz did at the gate, and what God did for us in Christ.

The Main Takeaway

When you take shelter under God's wings, He brings you in, provides for you, and redeems what was lost — through a Kinsman-Redeemer who was near, able, and willing.

- **Choose God, and cling.** “Thy God my God.” Ruth’s whole future turned on one decision on a dusty road.
- **Nothing is chance with God.** “Her hap was to light” on Boaz’s field. Take the next faithful step; God is arranging the field.
- **Do the humble work in front of you.** Ruth gleaned from morning till evening. God met her in the field.
- **Be a Boaz.** Bless the people who work for you, protect the vulnerable, give more than the law requires, and do right in public.
- **Grief does not have the last word.** “Call me Mara” became “Blessed be the LORD.”
- **You are not an outsider any longer.** In Christ, the stranger is made a member of the household of God.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Naomi.** A woman of Bethlehem whose name means *pleasant*. She lost her husband and both sons in Moab, came home bitter and called herself *Mara*, yet never let go of the LORD. She blessed Him when she heard Boaz’s name, planned Ruth’s approach to him, and ended holding her grandson.
- **Ruth.** A woman of Moab, a widow after about ten years of marriage. She clung to Naomi, chose Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God, gleaned tirelessly, went boldly to Boaz at the threshing floor, and was known to “all the city” as “a virtuous woman.” The great-grandmother of King David, and named in the genealogy of Jesus Christ.
- **Orpah.** Ruth’s sister-in-law, who kissed Naomi goodbye and went back “unto her people, and unto her gods.” Scripture does not condemn her; it simply shows the road she chose.
- **Elimelech.** “My God is king.” He took his family to Moab in a famine and died there.
- **Mahlon and Chilion.** Naomi’s sons, who married Moabite women and died without children. Mahlon was Ruth’s husband.
- **Boaz.** “A mighty man of wealth,” a relative of Elimelech, son of Rahab. He blessed his workers, protected and provided for a foreign widow, honoured her at the threshing floor, and redeemed her family lawfully at the gate. The great-grandfather of David, and a living picture of the Kinsman-Redeemer.
- **The nearer kinsman.** “Such a one,” deliberately unnamed. He was willing to buy a field but not to redeem a family, and gave his right to Boaz.
- **The elders and the women of Bethlehem.** Witnesses at the gate, and the voices that blessed Ruth, named Obed, and praised the LORD for Naomi.
- **Obed.** Ruth and Boaz’s son, whose name means *servant* or *worshipper*; the father of Jesse and grandfather of David.
- **The LORD God.** Rarely mentioned by the narrator and never seen, yet behind every turn: He gave bread, arranged the field, and gave the son. His *chesed* carried a family from emptiness to fullness.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Names with meaning.** *Bethlehem*, house of bread; *Ephratah*, fruitful; *Elimelech*, my God is king; *Naomi*, pleasant; *Mara*, bitter; *Obed*, servant or worshipper.

- **Moab.** The nation descended from Lot's son by his daughter; hostile to Israel since the Exodus; barred from the congregation by the Law (Deuteronomy 23:3-4).
- **A childless widow.** Without husband or son, she had no one to farm, inherit, or provide for her.
- **Gleaning.** The Law required landowners to leave corners and forgotten stalks for the poor, the stranger, the fatherless and the widow (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19).
- **The barley and wheat harvests.** Barley in spring around Passover; wheat ending about seven weeks later, near Pentecost. Ruth gleaned through both.
- **An ephah.** A dry measure of perhaps three-fifths of a bushel — around thirty pounds of barley.
- **Parched corn and vinegar.** Roasted grain and a sour-wine dip for bread, the ordinary food of the harvest field.
- **The threshing floor.** An open, windy space where grain was threshed and winnowed; owners slept there at harvest to guard the grain. A place with a bad reputation for a woman at night (Hosea 9:1).
- **Uncovering the feet.** Ruth uncovered "the place of his feet" (*margelot*) and lay there — a humble, bold appeal for marriage and redemption.
- **Spreading the skirt (*kanaph*).** Spreading the corner of one's garment over a woman signified marriage and protection (Ezekiel 16:8).
- **The kinsman-redeemer (*go'el*).** The nearest male relative, with the right and duty to buy back a relative's land or freedom (Leviticus 25:25, 47-49).
- **Raising up the name of the dead.** The first son of the marriage carried the dead husband's name and inherited his land (Deuteronomy 25:5-6).
- **The city gate.** The place of public legal business, where the elders sat and transactions were witnessed.
- **The sandal.** Handing over a sandal sealed a transfer of property (Ruth 4:7; compare Psalm 60:8).
- **"Seven sons."** The picture of a complete, perfect family.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Erotesis** — asking questions to make a point rather than to get information. "Why will ye go with me? are there yet any more sons in my womb…?" (1:11-13); "Is this Naomi?" (1:19); "shall I not seek rest for thee?" (3:1).
- **Idiom** — an expression whose meaning comes from how a people used it. "The hand of the LORD is gone out against me" (1:13); "The LORD do so to me, and more also" (1:17), a solemn oath; "found grace in thine eyes" (2:10); "spread thy skirt over" (3:9), take in marriage; "raise up the name of the dead" (4:5), give him an heir.
- **Polyptoton** — the same word repeated in different forms. "Her hap was to light" (2:3) — literally, *her chance chanced*.
- **Paronomasia** — a play on words that sound alike. "Take knowledge of me" (*nakar*) and "a stranger" (*nokri*) (2:10); "Naomi" (pleasant) and "Mara" (bitter) (1:20).
- **Metaphor** — speaking of one thing as another. "Under whose wings thou art come to trust" (2:12): God as a bird sheltering its young.

- **Euphemism** — a milder word put in place of something more direct. “Feet” is sometimes used this way in Hebrew; here the word *margelot*, “the place of the feet,” is used, and the story shows Ruth’s conduct was honourable.
- **Merism** — naming two extremes to include everything between. “Whether poor or rich” (3:10) — any young man at all.

What the Bible Actually Says

- **Ruth’s famous words were spoken to her mother-in-law,** not to a husband. “Whither thou goest, I will go” (1:16) is often used in weddings; it was Ruth’s vow to Naomi, and to Naomi’s God.
- **Ruth did not “happen” into Boaz’s field by accident.** The text says “her hap was to light” there — and lets the reader see whose hand was in it.
- **Nothing improper happened at the threshing floor.** Boaz called her “a virtuous woman,” protected her reputation, and settled the matter lawfully the next morning.
- **Boaz could not simply marry Ruth.** A nearer kinsman had the first right, and Boaz went through the Law to redeem her.
- **The nearer kinsman is never named.** He is “such a one.”
- **The shoe ceremony here is not the same as Deuteronomy 25:9.** Here it sealed a transfer; there it shamed a man who refused his duty.
- **Naomi’s “the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me” is her grief, not the story’s verdict on God.** By the end, the same women say, “Blessed be the LORD.”
- **Boaz’s mother was Rahab** of Jericho (Matthew 1:5).
- **Ruth the Moabitess is named in the genealogy of Jesus Christ** (Matthew 1:5), one of only four women named there before Mary.

God’s Will and Intent

- **God provides for the poor, the stranger and the widow.** He wrote gleaning into His Law centuries before Ruth needed it.
- **God welcomes those who come to Him, whoever they are.** A Moabite widow sheltered under the wings of the God of Israel and was brought into the line of the Messiah.
- **God works quietly and faithfully.** He rarely speaks in this book, yet He gave bread, arranged the field, and gave the son.
- **God restores what was lost.** Naomi’s emptiness was filled; Elimelech’s name and land were redeemed.
- **God works through faithful people.** Ruth’s loyalty, Naomi’s counsel and Boaz’s integrity were the means by which His purpose came to pass.
- **God provides a Redeemer who is near, able and willing.** Boaz pictured Him; Jesus Christ fulfilled it.