

WEEK FIVE

Drama in the Dark

A Word from the Author

We left the story with Ruth gleaned under Boaz's watchful protection and her mother-in-law beginning to hope again. Often when I teach this book I ask my audience to think a bit about the trajectory of Naomi's emotion. She has gone from having everything to losing everything. And when she stumbles back into her hometown, I think we are dealing with a victim of loss and, literally, depression. But by the time we reach the end of chapter 2, we've got a woman who is beginning to hope. She is beginning to see a road forward; she is starting to think that the future might just hold *some* small resolution to the pain she is currently experiencing. In chapter 3 she grabs hold of that potential and, like any good Jewish mother-in-law, begins to make a plan!

Real Time and Space

At the end of chapter 2 we read that Ruth gleaned in Boaz's fields until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. So as chapter 3 opens, we find ourselves at the end of the wheat harvest. This means that weeks have gone by, and we can anticipate that Ruth has become a regular at the harvest field. By now her good character has begun chipping away at the stereotypes of

her coworkers. The lunches under the shade cloth have fostered conversation, laughter, and perhaps even friendship. We can expect that our outsider is feeling a lot more comfortable than she did that very first, awful day. And we can probably anticipate that some of the Israelite young men involved in the harvest have taken more than one glance at this young widow. Hmm . . . yes, she is a Moabitess, but she sure is a great girl. Who knows, maybe there was even a little romance in the wind. But the most critical data here is that the wheat harvest is coming to an end. This means that Naomi's and Ruth's food supply is coming to an end as well. Just like a great temp job or a consulting gig, a real solution for our heroes is still out of reach. This family is still in crisis.

DAY ONE

The Plan

First Contact

Name one person in your life that you trust without question. Someone you *know* has your best interests in mind. Now imagine that that same person asked you to do something they believed would secure your future—take a formative job at half the going wage, intern under a particularly abusive (but accomplished) resident, pledge a specific sorority, marry a person of their choice. Even if the plan sounded outrageous to you, because of your trust in them, would you do it? Would you ask questions?

Into the Book

As we noted earlier, we've come to the end of the line for Naomi and Ruth. The gleaning laws have taken care of them through the harvest season, but the hungry season is on the horizon. What are our two widows going to do?

Ruth 3:1–6

¹Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? ²Is not Boaz our relative,

dabaq: Hebrew word often translated “cling.” This word has to do with fulfilling one’s familial obligations. In the book of Ruth, it is used to express Ruth’s kinship and loyalty to Naomi.

- What do you think is going to happen on that threshing floor?

- Do you think Ruth is being trafficked by her mother-in-law?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

Back in chapter 1 we observed Ruth’s love for Naomi in that she “clung” (*dabaq*) to Naomi and returned with her to a land that was not her own. In chapter 2 we read that Boaz had been told about Ruth’s devotion to Naomi and the kindness that she showed her. There can be no doubt that Ruth trusts Naomi with her life. But when Naomi asks Ruth to get herself cleaned up, go out alone to the threshing floor—a place on the edge of town, in the dark, where there are only men (more specifically, drunken men)—and instructs her as she does, don’t you think Ruth would at least wonder what Naomi is thinking? What are *you* thinking?

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

In the video, I will talk about Reba McEntire’s country song “Fancy.” Here, a desperate, single mother sends her adolescent daughter out in a bright red dress and makeup, telling her if she will be nice to the men, then they will be nice to her. This sort of sex trafficking is all over our world. And sadly, it

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is not simply the act of a perverted, callous, or greedy guardian, it is often the act of a desperate parent attempting to keep a family alive, or a desperate adolescent who doesn't know where else to turn. There are numerous websites where you can learn more about this epidemic. One I'd recommend is Shared Hope at <http://sharedhope.org> or Global Sisters Report, a project of the national Catholic reporter, at <http://globalsistersreport.org>. Here definitions and current areas of crisis are identified.

What do you know about this global problem? What do you think you, in your own space, might be able to do about this problem?

DAY TWO

The Kindness

First Contact

According to the investment gurus, a risk-averse investor is an investor who prefers *lower* returns with *known* risks rather than *higher* returns with *unknown* risks. Hence, a risk-averse investor prefers investments that provide a sure-shot return (government bonds, debentures, and index funds). A risk-lover is a person who is willing to take more risks while investing in order to earn higher returns (stocks!). How would you describe yourself?

Into the Book

In verses 7–8 we read the story of a young woman who, although she has a great deal to lose, takes the risk. Ruth does exactly as Naomi instructs her. She gets herself cleaned up, goes out to the edge of town, waits until all the women have gone home, watches while Boaz and his men have their last brew, and marks the location Boaz lays down to sleep. She then sneaks onto the threshing floor, uncovers Boaz's feet, and settles herself down for the night. Talk about high risk! With this act, Ruth has completely compromised her position in her new community—she has opened herself up to ridicule,

a ruined reputation, and assault. Why would Naomi put her in this position? Why would Ruth say yes? As the narrator tells us, in the middle of the night Boaz awakes, and is stunned to see a woman lying at his feet! Much more will be said in the video, but today we're going to take a close look at one verse from Boaz's response to this very bizarre (and very high-risk) situation.

Ruth 3:9–10

⁹He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."¹⁰And he said, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last *kindness* greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich." (ESV, italics mine)

The word translated "kindness" here is the Hebrew word *hēsed*. It is translated many different ways in your Bible because it shows up so often. Read each of the following passages in the versions listed below. The English translation of the word *hēsed* is highlighted in italics.

	NIV	NRSV	NASB
<p>Genesis 24:12-14</p> <p>Abraham sends his servant to his distant relatives to find a wife for an arranged marriage with his son, Isaac.</p>	<p>Then he prayed, "LORD, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show <i>kindness</i> to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a young woman, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown <i>kindness</i> to my master."</p>	<p>And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show <i>steadfast love</i> to my master Abraham. I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. Let the girl to whom I shall say, 'Please offer your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown <i>steadfast love</i> to my master."</p>	<p>He said, "O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show <i>lovingkindness</i> to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water; now may it be that the girl to whom I say, 'Please let down your jar so that I may drink,' and who answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels also'—[may] she [be the one] whom You have appointed for Your servant Isaac; and by this I will know that You have shown <i>lovingkindness</i> to my master."</p>
<p>Deuteronomy 7:9</p> <p>Yahweh's covenant with Israel.</p>	<p>Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of <i>love</i> to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.</p>	<p>Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains <i>covenant loyalty</i> with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.</p>	<p>Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His <i>lovingkindness</i> to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments.</p>

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Psalm 18:50 A song of thanksgiving.	He gives his king great victories; he shows <i>unfailing love</i> to his anointed, to David and to his descendants forever.	Great triumphs he gives to his king, and shows <i>steadfast love</i> to his anointed, to David and his descendants forever.	He gives great deliverance to His king, And shows <i>lovingkindness</i> to His anointed, To David and his descendants forever.
Psalm 103:8 A hymn of praise.	The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in <i>love</i> .	The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in <i>steadfast love</i> .	The LORD is compassionate and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in <i>lovingkindness</i> .
Psalm 109:12 The lament of a believer.	May no one extend <i>kindness</i> to [the wicked speaking against David] or take pity on his fatherless children.	May there be no one to do [the wicked speaking against David] a <i>kindness</i> , nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.	Let there be none to extend <i>lovingkindness</i> to [the wicked speaking against David], Nor any to be gracious to his fatherless children.

- What are some observations you've made about the ways *hēsed* may be translated?
- When speaking of one human's *hēsed* toward another, how is the word translated?
- When speaking of the Lord's *hēsed* toward humans, how is the word usually translated?
- Now go back to Ruth 3:10. How would you translate *hēsed* there?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

The word *hêsed* appears all over the Old Testament. The verses above represent only a handful of those occurrences. The reason for this is that the word is central to the idea of covenant-making and covenant-keeping. Its exact meaning is “covenant faithfulness”—the evidence that someone is keeping one’s commitments, no matter what. This is why you will see translations like “kindness,” “steadfast love,” or “lovingkindness.” It is this word that the biblical writers use when speaking of God’s unfailing commitment to his people (regardless of what a mess they are). And it is this word that Boaz uses to speak of Ruth’s behavior. Ruth has shown *hêsed* to Naomi and to him by sticking by her mother-in-law and by choosing Boaz instead of some younger man. What does this understanding of the word *hêsed* reveal to you about Ruth’s character?

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

We started our studies this week by asking if you’ve got at least one person in your life that you truly *trust*. If you are blessed to have such a person, I can predict that the reason you trust them is because they have *earned* it. When someone elicits that level of confidence from another human being it is because they have demonstrated that they mean what they say and they say what they mean so many times that there is no longer any question as to their trustworthiness. So now we ask ourselves the same question: Are we the kind of people who have earned this kind of trust from our spouses? Our coworkers? Our children?

DAY THREE

The Promise

First Contact

In our world today, the words “I promise” often don’t mean much. I promise I will follow through on the contract I’ve signed. I promise I will promote you when you complete this expectation. I promise I will stick with this relationship in sickness and in health. I promise that I will continue to support our children when I walk away. I promise that I will fulfill my campaign commitments. As I watch my world unfold around me it seems that many are more interested in the loopholes that get a person *out* of “I promise” than they are in the hard work and sacrifice it takes to follow through on those inestimable words.

Into the Book

In yesterday’s reading, we saw Ruth’s character displayed in the *hésed* that she showed to both Boaz and Naomi. Today we see Boaz’s *hésed* in response to Ruth’s *hésed*.

Ruth 3:11–14

¹¹And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. ¹²But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. ¹³Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do it. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the LORD lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.”

¹⁴So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, “It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.” (NRSV)

- Why does Boaz start with “do not be afraid”?

- What is the potential problem facing Boaz in doing what Ruth has asked?

- Why does it matter who is a closer relative?

- In the second half of verse 13 Boaz offers an if/then statement augmented by the phrase “as the LORD lives.” What do you think Boaz means by this? What would you call this statement?

- Why do you think Boaz instructs Ruth to stay at the threshing floor until morning in verse 14?
- Why does the narrator emphasize that Ruth’s departure happens in the hazy light of early dawn?
- Who is Boaz speaking to when he states in verse 14, “It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor”?
- What do you learn about Boaz’s character in these exchanges?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

The phrase that Boaz uses in verse 13 “as the LORD lives,” is something known in Hebrew grammar as an oath formula. If you’ve worked through my other studies, you know that covenants are sealed with oaths. Just like signing a contract makes you culpable in our world, swearing an oath made a person culpable in Ruth’s world. So Boaz is not only saying, “I promise to do this thing that you ask,” but he is *swearing* on oath to do it. Granted there is no one to witness this oath besides himself and the day laborer we have come to know and love (i.e., Ruth), but this influential and wealthy man has sworn on his good character all the same. More important to me as a believer, Boaz has chosen to swear in the name of his God. If he fails to follow through on his promise, it is not merely *his* reputation that will be smeared. We the readers are now forced into the position we have already been in several times in this book: Is Boaz the man of *hayil* we have been

told he is? Does he truly fear Yahweh? Will we see the character of Boaz's God in Boaz's actions?

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

One of the leading reasons that unchurched people are not interested in church is the behavior they have seen in the lives of those claiming to be Christians. Let me say up front that I became a Christian at the age of fifteen, and in the last nearly four decades of being a member of the community of Christ I have seen and heard thousands of unjust (and bizarre) accusations against the church and its members that have had much more to do with the bias and stereotypes of the accuser than the actual members or activities of the Christian community. But it is still absolutely true that the unbeliever judges the character of *my* God by *my* behavior. And if my behavior as a Christian, or my church's behavior as a community, doesn't prove that "I promise" means "I promise," then I am damaging far more than just *my* reputation. And if my behavior or my church's behavior demonstrates that "outsiders need not apply" . . . then I am afraid it is ultimately the reputation of the God of Israel that is being slandered by my poor behavior. So if you are an insider, what this narrative is challenging you to do is clean up your act. If you're an outsider, what this narrative is challenging you to see is that the God of the Bible can be trusted. And those who truly fear him can be trusted as well.