**Part 7: The Instructions of Naomi**

**Ruth 2:18-23** [New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised](https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Anglicised-NRSVA-Bible/) **(NRSVA)**

18She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. 19Her mother-in-law said to her, ‘Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.’

So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, ‘The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.’ 20Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, ‘Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!’

Naomi also said to her, ‘The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.’ 21Then Ruth the Moabite said, ‘He even said to me, “Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest.” ‘ 22Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, ‘It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field.’ 23So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

The story now focuses on Naomi’s coming home again and Ruth coming home for the first time. Naomi first interpreted her misfortune as G-d’s doing (1:13, 20-21). This mentality of blaming G-d or assuming that bad fortune was punishment continued into the New Testament.

Jesus was asked who sinned to cause a man to be blind, the man himself or his parents. Jesus’ answer was neither, but that G-d’s glory would be made manifest.

It is only when Ruth had succeeded in finding help that Naomi finally disclosed to her that Boaz was actually a distant relative. At the same time, she also warns her against the danger for her in the fields. Naomi is finally teaching Ruth about how the Israelite culture operates.

Finally, Naomi has recovered some hope and confidence so that she began to think about Ruth’s well-being, not just her own. We recall that Ruth was given her fill of food, so the story indicates that even though she was fully committed, she was not required to sacrifice her own well-being.

***Blessed be he of the Lord, who has not failed in His kindness to the living or to the dead!*** [Naomi’s words, Verse 20]. The words translated as “failed in his kindness” are literally “who has not abandoned his *hesed.*”

Please recall that *hesed* means an act of loving kindness, the idea of faithful love in action and often it is expressed in G-d’s covenant relationship with Israel. G-d’s *hesed* reflects his persistence and unconditional tenderness and mercy, seeking after us in mercy and love.

Boaz was kind to the living (Ruth and Naomi) as well as honoring their dead. The latter is always an act of people, not G-d, who attends to the living. But the JPS commentary also suggested that Ruth may have believed that Boaz also showed *hesed* to her husband when he was still living.

And again, there are parallels with the Abraham story. The phrase, ‘abandoned his *hesed*’ occurs only one other place in scripture where it refers to G-d. Abraham’s servant was looking for a wife for Abraham’s son. He asked G-d to “make it happen” and bring a qualified young woman to the well. Immediately, Rebekah came. The servant then says, *Blessed be the Lord…who has not withheld* *[‘asabh*] *His steadfast faithfulness* [*hesed*] *from my master* [Genesis 24:27].

Naomi appreciates the actions of a powerful man who acts as G-d’s agent, and this is not too surprising. In their ancient world, women were utterly dependent on good men. And even though the world has changed a lot, there will always be people who are genuinely at the mercy of *hesed* who cannot survive and take care of themselves. We are to be G-d’s agents in those situations.

***He even told me, ‘Stay close to my workers***…[Ruth speaking, verse 21]. Looking at the Hebrew words, Ruth first was told to keep close to Boaz’ girls, but the term could refer to either gender.

Alter says that in the text, Ruth mistakenly uses the masculine form of the word, leaving some scholars to think that perhaps as a Moabite she did not appreciate the distinct gender roles in the Hebrew culture. Then Naomi corrects her, and she learns that her safety will be better maintained if she sticks with the girls. However, Boaz told her that his lads will not harm her and to stick with them; he also said to stick with his girls.

***Then she stayed at home with her mother-in-law*** [verse 23]. We see that no matter how connected Ruth was becoming with Boaz and the community, her first allegiance was still with Naomi. And this was viewed as acceptable and to be praised. She was not yet in Boaz’ house and, after the first day, there is no indication of what will come.

The end of the season of reaping comes, and there is no indication that they will be cared for in the future. It is then that Naomi hatches a bold plan and instructs Ruth step by step. And while Ruth seeks Boaz on the threshing floor as she was instructed to do, she does this in her own way. She follows her own path in seeking a permanent home for them. We will address that part of the story in the part dealing with chapter 3.

**Food for Thought:**

1. We see that Naomi has become more active in seeking a solution to their future. As the story developed, both women became more active. There is a term in psychology called “learned helplessness.” Such helplessness is often attributed to passive victims, whether male or female, who react to events but who are inwardly paralyzed and not able to initiate actions. From the story of Ruth, we can see that the two women were ultimately rewarded for taking action and not passively waiting to be cared for.

Yet, we also know there are times that, biblically, we are called upon to wait on G-d’s timing and not prematurely or manipulatively taking control. There is a tension here between being too controlling or being too passive. Can you think of times in your own life that you were too controlling, in taking charge? Or too passive, in waiting too long? What were the outcomes?

1. How have solutions for women’s survival and well-being remained the same as they were in Ruth’s time? How have they changed? As you look back on your own grandmothers and mothers, how did they approach problems of survival differently than the women in your generation?
2. How would you work with a woman in your religious community coming out of a family with “learned helplessness” to understand her options in a violent marriage from a faith point of view?
3. If you are a female, have you yourself or someone you know suffered repercussions in a religious community for standing up for yourself, for being too outspoken, or too angry? For crossing boundaries of spoken or unspoken rules of what was considered “appropriate” for a female?

Were you able to find the boundary or a balance between being authentic and forthright and not being regarded as offensive? Are there different standards for men and women in your faith community? What are the advantages or burdens for each gender?

**Personal Notes:**

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