

The fields of Boaz are the same fields where, generations later, angels announced the birth of a newborn Messiah to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night.



hesed

A Hebrew word for compassionate kindness, a slowness to anger, an abundance of steadfast love, and the faithful keeping of promises.

Hesed is a major theme in God's relationship with creation. You can find examples of this in other books, too.

Search the Psalms for descriptions of God translated "steadfast love".

The prophet Jonah recognizes hesed with disgust at the end of his tale, frustrated that God would be slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love for the people of Nineveh. It's love unquantified and undeserved!

Begin by reading all four chapters of Ruth. Get a sense of the story's arch and then we'll read through it again more slowly.

God does not have a speaking role in this book, but sometimes the characters evoke the name of God when they are contemplating or acting with 'hesed'. They know that this generous and gracious love comes from God and has the power to change everything. It can make a way where the status quo and the keeping of the law cannot.

Pay attention to the acts of hesed, the way Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz all go above and beyond common decency or local law for the sake of abundance and life. Underline these verses. How do acts of hesed yield more hesed?

Consider a time you felt stuck between a rock and a hard place, two measly choices that couldn't set you free.

Who helped you move beyond that binary? What changed when they showed you another possibility? Who needs your help finding another way today?

The law to show us what we need to see, including the ways it can instruct, but cannot save.

Salvation requires generous actions and relationships that flow through the meaning of the law toward freedom and life.



famine

The Book of Ruth begins with the loss of loved ones and land in the midst of a literal famine.

Who are the Moabites?

Descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, whose son is named Moab. They lived in the highlands east of the Dead Sea and worshipped a God of protection described similarly to Yahweh, but called Chemosh.

The Moabites spoke a different dialect of Hebrew than the Israelites, but were familiar culturally. They did not intermingle and the Israelites often referred to Moabites as the True God's enemies.

Read Ruth 1 and notice the layers of scarcity.

Widows, orphans, and foreigners are among the most vulnerable outsiders in Moabite and Israelite culture. These women are all three! Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem even though she doesn't have anything or a plan for what's next. She can't promise them a future and tells her daughters to return to their fathers' houses in Moab.

Ruth 1:14 says, "...but Ruth clung to her". The root of that verb "to cling" is the same one used in Genesis 2:24 when God describes families being formed. This time, the word is feminine instead of masculine and the family is chosen instead of arranged.

Ruth 1:19 says, "Call me no longer Naomi, but call me Mara." Naomi means *pleasant* and Mara means *bitter*. She is not the woman they might remember!

The Book of Ruth does not stay in famine. Can you think of other stories in scripture and in your own life that move from scarcity to abundance?

What does your name mean? To whom do you cling?

At the end of chapter 3, Boaz gives Ruth six measures of barley to bring home. A feast! When we have what we need, we dream bigger and have access to more opportunities.



gleaning

There is a law that leaves the edges of fields un-harvested so that the most vulnerable folks can gather scraps and do not completely starve.

Charity and Justice

The law that allows for gleaning is a last ditch safety net for those who have nothing. People without a sure source of work or provision are allowed to gather what they can without being charged with trespassing or robbery.

The law is not a long term solution or a path to dignity. It will take acts of mercy and justice to move Naomi and Ruth from hunger and crisis to safety and belonging.

Read Ruth 2-3. Notice the meager expectations Naomi and Ruth have for their future.

Vulnerable folks are permitted to glean the fields...so long as they do not disrupt the main production. It is hard and humbling work, gathering morsels while also fending off advances and ignoring pity (Ruth 2:2). They do not receive the benefits of room and board like the rest of the workers. It is something to do, but still shy of a framework for stability and life.

Ruth 2:12 is a glimpse of hesed and hope. Boaz notices Ruth and challenges the status quo by offering protection and a seat at his table.

Does your community have a framework for making sure those who have nothing are not forgotten? Who gets to decide if it's working well - and for whom?

How do you know when you have "enough"? What's the difference between surviving and thriving?

Boaz and Ruth marry and bear a child. They become the great grandparents of King David.

Later, Ruth is among the fierce and faithful women named in the genealogy of Jesus.



harvest

Acts of hesed have the power to center those who were on the margins, to reveal God's feast of plenty and belonging for all!

Boaz gathers elders and public witnesses together in the light of day for this business transaction.

It is a meeting set in stark contrast to Ruth's attempt to secure her fate all alone and at night.

Boaz uses his personal power, his status in community, and his keen knowledge of the law to ensure that Ruth and Naomi's future are not minimized by the law or by those who keep it.

Read Ruth 4 and notice the difference between *keeping the law* and *fulfilling the law*.

Boaz invites his relative to claim rights to the land that belonged to Naomi's husband and sons. The man sees this as a terrific opportunity until Boaz reminds him that taking responsibility for the land means also taking responsibility for Naomi and Ruth.

Any children Ruth would bear by the man would carry on the line of her deceased husband. When he realizes the land would not be a simple gain and inheritance, he keeps the law by forfeiting his rights. Boaz is next in line and fulfills the law with hesed. He does not see Naomi and Ruth as fiscal liabilities, but as blessings and kin.

This story invites us to wonder, "What's the difference between personal legacy and biblical generosity?"

Have you ever been part of a communal blessing in public? What happened? What did it mean?