

4) An inadequate view of human nature. Semi-pelagianism thinks more highly of human nature than biblically it should. It assumes an ability in human beings to (with God's help) pull ourselves up by the boot-straps. While tremblingly recognizing that 'there, but for the grace of God, go I', one suspects that so many of the moral casualties among Christian leaders are the result of a failure to grasp the 'exceeding sinfulness of sin' that reformed and biblical theology declares.

5) A tragic failure to give due honour to the Triune God. Biblical religion declares that I was loved from eternity by the Father who resolved to save me, that when Christ died upon the cross his sufferings were sufficient to meet, once and for all, every demand that God's justice could ever lay at my door; that the Spirit sovereignly worked in me to arouse me and to effect faith in Christ. Amazing grace!

But all this is lost or, at best, watered down in semi-

pelagianism. The Father's love becomes one which is the result of knowing what I would do. The Son's sacrifice requires my actions to make it complete. The Sovereign Spirit is tied to the decision of my free-will. Such a God is a pale shadow of the biblical Lord. While welcoming the emphasis on intimacy in modern evangelical worship there often seems a tragic loss of the sense of God's awesome greatness. In part, at least, semi-pelagianism is a cause.

I have often had occasion in this column to point the finger at the inadequacies that so often lie within reformed practice. On this one occasion I have deemed it appropriate to direct attention elsewhere. Yet, perhaps, once again we are the ultimate failures. If we do not present by teaching and life the winsomeness and adequacy of the reformed gospel we can hardly complain if others manufacture a broken cistern of an alternative!

Ruth 2:1–23

Grace for Today

STEPHEN DRAY

This is the second of three studies

The Story With No Explanation

Biblical narratives are characterized by the fact that the storyline is often given without additional comment by the author. Thus, no moral may be drawn and no obvious interpretation of the events given. However, sensitive readers are expected to work out for themselves the lessons built into the stories. This is true of the book of Ruth and especially of this chapter. In a nutshell, the story is a simple one: Ruth, in trying to secure enough food for herself and Naomi, finds a rich patron, Boaz. However, lying behind these events are two great truths which the author intends us to spot!

Discipleship Changes Everything!

When people become disciples of the Lord it changes their way of life; a fact eloquently demonstrated in this chapter. Boaz recognized that Ruth had placed herself under the protection and care of the Lord (verse 12).

As an Israelite, he had done the same and the result in both of them was a life of delighted obedience to God. This is a mark of spiritual maturity: though here it is shown even in a young convert like Ruth. However, it is most clearly seen in Boaz. In the Old Testament law God had demanded that at harvest time the harvester was not to reap right into the corners of his fields. He was also told not to pick up what was left after the reapers had gone, nor to go back to collect a forgotten sheaf (Lev. 19:9; 23:22; Dt. 24:19). The reason for these commands was that God wanted his people to show a concern for the poor and needy, to show compassion to people like Ruth and Naomi.

The unscrupulous man could, of course, easily neglect this duty and this is hinted at in both verses 2 and 22. Alternatively, such a man could find other ways to evade the law of God. However, when we read about Boaz, we discover that he not only obeys the letter of the law but he also fulfils its intention. Thus, in his dealing with Ruth, Boaz is seen as considerate, tender, compassionate, generous and kind. It was, of course, this kind

of attitude that God's law was intended to promote, even if the people of God frequently slipped into legalism.

Ruth recognized the significance of this action of Boaz for, in verse 10 we are told she asked, 'Why have I found favour?'. The word 'favour' is one of the most important words in the Old Testament since it describes the unmerited mercy which God shows to his children and then, denotes the expected response of God's children to him, to one another and then to all. Ruth, in asking her question, recognized Boaz's godly character and thus, recognized him as a true disciple of the Lord.

The Bible never tires of teaching this lesson. A true disciple is a person who has met God: a meeting that must change that person's life. The disciple's life will now be a copy (imperfect, of course) of God's life and character. Delighted love for God will be the result; a love delighting in all God's wishes and fulfilling the intention of all his words.

Above all, in the New Testament we are shown Jesus as our example. We are told that Jesus was 'in very nature God, but did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Php. 2:6–11). Paul, however, adds the following comment to his citation of what appears to be an early Christian hymn. He says, 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus' (Php. 2:5). Simply, but profoundly, he tells us that we are expected to be copies of Jesus himself!

Sometimes it is suggested that a spiritual life will be harsh and unattractive. We sometimes meet such supposedly godly people. However, a truly spiritual life is lovely and attractive as we can see in this chapter. Ruth and Boaz shine forth as attractive and really human people. It is this very fact that draws us to this chapter and makes us delight in the story. But it is also a lesson that all disciples need to learn. True believers are to be attractive because the favour of God to them makes them attractive.

There is, moreover, no part of life that is un-influenced by discipleship. This is clearly shown in this chapter. Discipleship is seen in the home: Ruth showed a tenderness and a respect for her ageing mother-in-law (verse 2). Naomi had no right to expect all that Ruth did for her since the law did not demand it. But Ruth was a true disciple and a true disciple does not think about rights, but about needs and responsibilities. Because God had been merciful to Ruth in her needs, she now shows the same attitude to Naomi. Elsewhere

in the Bible similar teaching is found which emphasizes that discipleship will be seen in the home (Compare, e.g. Eph. 5:1, 2, 22–6:4).

Discipleship is also to be seen in the 'work-place'. Ruth's conduct was respectful; she even said 'please' (verse 7) when taking her rights! Moreover, her hard work was immediately noticed (note the second part of verse 7). Similarly Boaz the rich landowner (verse 1) was generous, he sought to help the needy, he was approachable, friendly and compassionate. He used his God-given privileges to serve God and we are to do the same (Compare Eph. 6:5–9).

Finally, we ought to notice that when God's mercy has been experienced, a person's attitudes are changed. We have already seen this in this chapter but it needs emphasizing. Ruth was willing to take the most menial and degrading part (verse 2) since service for God in the service of others led her to set aside her dignity. Yet how often do we proudly defend ours. In addition, we see how mercy leads to childlike dependence on God. This is seen both in Boaz (verse 4) and Naomi, who was so quick to notice God's provision for her (verses 19, 20). Above all, we see this truth in Ruth's wide-eyed wonder at God's provision for her in the most ordinary of circumstances (verse 10).

The result of such an attitude is seen in these verses. There is a peace and tranquility both in need and in plenty; a lesson which we surely often need to learn.

God's Care in Hard Times

This faithful care of God for his children, even in hard times is especially seen in Ruth's experience as described in this chapter. Perhaps it is helpful at this point to remind ourselves what Ruth's needs were:

i) She had the obvious needs that a widow would have. In the ancient world, a widow without a family was a most pathetic person; often such people were very poor, they depended on the charity of others and many were forced to turn to prostitution since their bodies were the only resources that they could sell.

ii) Ruth was an alien, friendless in a foreign land. This fact is repeatedly emphasized in 2:2, 6, 10, 11, 21. Many immigrants to a new country will understand how Ruth must have felt.

iii) She was recently bereaved and must therefore have been under great emotional strain. Boaz seems to recognize this in verse 11.

iv) She was a recent convert. The great confession of 1:16–18 was now being put to the test in the severest way possible.

These things must have filled Ruth with doubts and fears. Some believers today try to hide behind empty spiritual words and are not always honest about their

problems. However, most of us, if we are honest, have experienced at one time or another the same sort of difficulties as Ruth did. This is one of the reasons why the book of Ruth is so useful to us. Let us notice, then, how God met Ruth's needs.

Firstly, Ruth began to meet her own needs! Common-sense (often lacking in God's people), led to careful thought and sensible action (verses 2, 3 and 7) and proved to be part of God's guidance to her. She did what she could and left what she couldn't do in the hands of God.

Secondly, Ruth sought the advice of others close to her (verse 2) and found the will of the Lord in their sensible advice. Indeed she discovered God's care for her on a number of occasions in the same way. She found God's care in the tenderness, compassion and generosity of others (verses 8, 9). That was another way in which God provided for her.

Thirdly, Ruth found God directly at work in her circumstances. Humanly, by complete coincidence, God led her steps to Boaz, the person most able to help her! This fact was noticed by the author of Ruth (verse 3).

All this leads to some very practical lessons. We notice that God's provision was not miraculous. Many

believers have an exaggerated regard for miracles and they do not seem to think that God is at work if they have not experienced a miracle. For them, the book of Ruth may be disappointing since there is no hint of a miracle here. But God does provide for her and those of us (i.e. for most believers) whose lives are as free of miracle as Ruth's. This is a great comfort: if God provided for her in her ordinary, unexciting, day-to-day experience, he can and will do the same for us!

Moreover, God is seen to be at work in *all* Ruth's affairs and in her case they were mostly small ones! What comfort this is to us in our small lives!

It is also important to notice that there is no dramatic change in Ruth's life (not yet, at least!). Rather God showed himself in his daily, detailed attention to her in the middle of all her needs. God did not suddenly deliver her. He met her where she was.

It is this fact which enabled her, and should enable us, to trust him even in the middle of our needs. Boaz's wish (verse 12) should become a conviction which, by faith, governs our lives as it did Ruth's.

Stephen Dray is editor of Evangel.

Ephesians 6:12

The True Nature of the Believer's Conflict

DAVID SEARLE

When school-leavers are job-hunting, they usually read the advertisements in the paper with the descriptions of the vacancies, and wonder if it is worthwhile applying. They may see a post advertised which sounds to be along the lines they have been considering. They wonder about applying: Are they qualified for it? Could they cope with it?

It is an important question—what are we capable of? Some applicants for jobs are only wasting the time of the employer. They have neither the experience, the training nor the ability needed. I have occasionally been in the position of interviewing, and I can tell you that it can be very irritating to have to interview someone who is not even remotely likely to be offered the post. We have, therefore, to be realistic about ourselves. We have to get to know ourselves and our capabilities.

The apostle Paul says: *Our struggle is not against flesh and blood.* Before he tells us what is ahead of us, he is reminding us of ourselves and our weak human natures. We have to be realistic about ourselves. We have to come to know ourselves, for until we do, we will lose many battles through being unaware of the odds against us. Let us think about this.

What Does Paul Mean?

Of course, by *flesh and blood* he means fallen human nature. That means people. So the apostle is saying that the focus of this spiritual war in which every