

A short act of worship for use in people's homes, provided by Mrs Rosie Greenhalgh.

Call to worship Psalm 91 vv 1-2

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'

Hymn You give rest to the weary (*Singing the Faith* 657) Nathan Fellingham (b. 1977) ¹
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGJIZvl8PJM>

1. You give rest to the weary,
you bring strength to the weak;
as they wait in your presence,
there is grace for their need.

So I'll wait, I'll wait,

yes I'll wait, I'll wait for you.

I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge.'

I will say of the Lord, 'He is my strength'

*I will say of the Lord, 'He is my shelter,
my hiding place.'*

2. You can come in the silence

You can come in the noise

Bringing peace in a moment

Bringing comfort and joy

So I'll wait, I'll wait...

I will say of the Lord...

I will come to the source of all creation;

I will drink from the well that never dries.

*I will draw from the One who won't grow
tired, the Lord of all.*

Prayer of Adoration & Confession (*drawing on Psalm 91*)

Almighty God, I come to praise you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I come to acknowledge that you are my refuge, my strength, my shelter and my hiding place.

Creator God, I come to the source of all creation, knowing there is grace enough for my need.

Redeemer God, let me drink from the well that never dries, the water that wells up to eternal life.

Holy God, I will draw from the One who won't grow tired, for you give rest to the weary.

Lord, forgive me for the times when I have let the anxieties of these days of crisis overwhelm me.

I will not fear the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday, for the Lord will be with me in trouble and will deliver me.

Forgive me for the times when I have felt that you were far from me in my affliction. I will rest in the shadow of the Almighty, for he is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.

Forgive me when I have forgotten the many blessings poured upon me, and focused too much on my troubles and difficulties. May I be inspired by your Holy Spirit to find comfort and joy in looking outward to love my God and my neighbour.

Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I give you thanks and praise. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer**Introduction to the Reading**

Today we continue with the story of Ruth, ready to listen again for God's story, and for our story, within it. Naomi has come back to Bethlehem after 10 years living in Moab; she returns in sorrow, lamenting the death of her husband and both her sons, and feeling that God has brought misfortune upon her. The bright spot in her life is her daughter-in-law Ruth, a Moabite who has shown great loyalty to Naomi, coming with her to Bethlehem, and saying to her:

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. (Ruth 1 vv 16b-17a)

They arrive in Bethlehem just as the barley harvest is beginning.

Reflection

Naomi is not completely destitute. As we shall learn in chapter 4, she has inherited Elimelek's land and presumably his house. But she is short of ready money to buy food. Why doesn't she ask for help? I suspect she is a proud and independent lady who doesn't want her neighbours to think that she has returned only in order to receive charity. We have all met people like Naomi.

God's law, given through Moses, states:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 23 v 22)

As a poor Moabite, Ruth fits the criteria very well, so off she goes to glean.

We can imagine that it was demeaning for Ruth to do this, just as it is for those who have to use food banks in the UK today; but she does it because she must have food for herself and Naomi. Something leads Ruth to a field owned by Boaz. Is this coincidence, or is the God whom Ruth has made her own already at work in her life? She works very hard indeed at the back-breaking toil of gleaning, as the overseer testifies when Boaz himself appears on the scene.

The name Boaz means 'In him is strength'; later it is the name of one of the pillars of Solomon's Temple, presumably after this worthy ancestor of Solomon (*1 Kings 7 v 21*). Boaz is a man of standing in the community, a faithful and respected leader, a man of God. His greeting to the harvesters: *The Lord be with you* shows his awareness of God on this normal working day.

Boaz knows his own workers well, for he quickly spots the stranger and asks about her. He doesn't have time to make a considered decision, so his words tell us a lot about his character. We see that he is a man who loves God's law, for rather than looking to his own interests and asking Ruth to move on to someone else's field tomorrow so that he can keep more of his grain, Boaz encourages her to stay and to follow his own women workers. Like Boaz, we often find ourselves in situations where we have a decision to make and no time to pray about it. What do our choices reveal about our character? Do we show the love of God or the love of self?

Boaz also tells Ruth that he has instructed his men not to molest her. The book of Judges contains several sad stories of sexual harassment in those times, and we need only listen to the news to know that similar things happen in our world today. Human nature has not changed and the poor are still vulnerable to exploitation. We, like Boaz, must be aware of what goes on in our own community and seek to protect those who cannot protect themselves.

Later that day, Ruth is shown more kindness when Boaz provides her with a meal and so much roasted grain that she has some left to take home to Naomi. His men are told to leave a generous amount of barley for her to collect, so much that she takes home about 13 kg, a great deal more than she might have expected to glean. It must have been quite heavy to carry at the end of a long day. No wonder Naomi exclaims: *Blessed be the man who took notice of you!*

It transpires that Boaz is a close relative of Elimelek, and one of their guardian-redeemers. Land was believed to belong to God and was allocated by him (through Moses and Joshua) to a family in perpetuity. If someone was so poor that they needed to sell land, God's law said:

The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land. If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold. (Leviticus 25 vv 23-25)

This nearest relative was known as a guardian-redeemer. Naomi blesses Boaz for his kindness and agrees that Ruth should glean only in Boaz's fields until the harvest is over.

For me, the heart of this chapter comes in verses 11-12, where Boaz tells Ruth why he favours her: *I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband – how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.*

Verse 11 recalls the story of Abraham and his nephew Lot (*Genesis 12 vv 1-5*); it takes us back to the origins of Israel (Abraham's descendants through his grandson Jacob) and Moab (Lot's descendants). In that Genesis passage, Abraham is promised that through him all peoples on earth will be blessed. As Christians, we are reminded that all peoples on earth are blessed through our Lord Jesus, and that Boaz and Ruth are his ancestors. Their story is part of his story.

In verse 12 Boaz's prayer for Ruth is that she may be richly rewarded by God, under whose wings she has come to take refuge. We see in the book of Ruth how Boaz becomes the answer to his own prayer, part of the means by which Ruth is rewarded. Just as last Sunday we saw in Ruth's commitment to Naomi a faint picture of God's commitment to us, we now see in Boaz a faint picture of our great Redeemer Jesus, for in his care for a poor foreign woman Boaz goes far beyond what the law requires and shows Ruth the love of God.

In this time of coronavirus crisis, like Naomi we may be lamenting and feeling that God has brought misfortune upon us. But the Lord is in this trouble with us, working to bring good as we have seen him working in Ruth's life. He is our strength, our shelter and our hiding place; we can draw from the One who won't grow tired, the Lord of all.

As we pray for one another, we trust that God will answer our prayers, and rejoice that as we show God's love to one another, we ourselves can become the answer to our own prayers. For 'Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours'. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge. For you rest in the shadow of the Almighty. Amen.

Hymn Safe in the shadow of the Lord (*Singing the Faith 509*) Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926) ²
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDyfZPgFSK0>

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| 1. Safe in the shadow of the Lord,
beneath his hand and power,
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
my fortress and my tower. | 4. His holy angels keep my feet
secure from every stone;
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
and unafraid go on. |
| 2. My hope is set on God alone,
though Satan spreads his snare,
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
to keep me in his care. | 5. Strong in the everlasting Name,
and in my Father's care,
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
who hears and answers prayer. |
| 3. From fears and phantoms of the night,
from foes about my way,
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
by darkness as by day. | 6. Safe in the shadow of the Lord,
possessed by love divine,
I trust in him,
I trust in him,
and meet his love with mine. |

Prayer of Thanksgiving & Intercession

Lord, I thank you that you are at work in my life. Help me to live close to you, so that when I have to make quick decisions, I shall be guided by your Spirit of love and generosity.

I pray for all suffering from coronavirus, at home and in hospital, and for their doctors and carers.. On this MHA Sunday, I pray for residents and workers in care homes, in fear of Covid-19...

Remembering Ruth and Naomi, I pray your blessing on widows and widowers, and on all who are bereaved...

I pray for all who are exploited and abused by others; for those suffering sexual harassment and abuse; for those enmeshed in modern slavery or struggling with addiction.

Help me to care more for the poor; for those who are driven to use food banks; for those wondering how they will feed their children during the summer holidays; for those who have lost jobs or income in the current crisis.

I pray for my family and friends, that they may know you to be their refuge and strength...

Almighty God, through your son Jesus Christ you have blessed all the families of the earth and redeemed us from sin and death. I thank you that you are with me always, in trouble and in joy, my faithful God in whom I trust. Remind me that Christ has no body now on earth but mine, and make me part of the answer to my own prayers.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Hymn Best of all is God is with us (*Singing the Faith 610*) Andrew Pratt (b. 1948) ³
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HW0AORsE8SQ> There are 7 verses in the accompaniment; if you treat one as an introduction and another as an instrumental verse, it should work reasonably well!

Introductory verse

1. Best of all is God is with us,
God will hold and never fail.
Keep that truth when storms are raging,
God remains though faith is frail.
2. Best of all is God is with us,
life goes on and needs are met,
God is strongest in our weakness.
Love renews, will not forget.
3. Best of all is God is with us,
hearts are challenged, strangely
warmed,
faith is deepened, courage strengthened,
grace received and hope reformed.
4. Best of all is God is with us,
in our joy and through our pain,
till that final acclamation:
'life is Christ, and death is gain'.

Instrumental verse

5. Best of all is God is with us
as we scale eternal heights,
love grows stronger, undiminished;
earth grows dim by heaven's lights.

Blessing

The love of the Father enfold you, the wisdom of the Son enlighten you, the fire of the Spirit inflame you; and the blessing of God, the Three in One, be upon you and abide with you now and for ever. Amen.

Acknowledgements

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