

In God's Care - The Book of Ruth

#2 God's hand in our future

Ruth ch.2

Intro

A gathering of friends at an English estate nearly turned to tragedy when one of the children strayed into deep water. The gardener heard the cries for help, plunged in, and rescued the drowning child. His grateful parents asked the gardener what they could do to reward him. He hesitated, then said, "I wish my son could go to college someday and become a doctor." "We'll see to it," the parents of the rescued child promised. Years later, the child who had strayed into the pool and was rescued by the gardener became the prime minister of England. He became sick; stricken with pneumonia. The best physician in the nation was summoned. His name was Dr. Alexander Fleming. You'll know him as the man who discovered and developed penicillin. Fleming was the son of that gardener who had saved the prime minister's life when he was a boy. The prime minister in focus was Winston Churchill. After his recovery Churchill remarked, "Rarely has one man owed his life twice to the same person."

Ron Hutchcraft, Wake Up Calls, Moody, 1990, p. 22.

As citizens of the so-called 'Lucky Country' we know that the numbers swing our way and we 'get lucky'. But even we sometimes look at coincidences and ask, 'What's going on behind the scenes; is someone watching over this person?' The writer of the Book of Ruth is counting on such curiosity about happenstance.

Ruth 2:1-3 Coincidence or providence?

The story begs you to consider a bigger picture behind the circumstances of the characters. In chapter 2 we read:

'Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. ² And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." She said to her, "Go, my daughter."
³ So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.' (Ruth 2¹⁻³ NRSV)

Note the writer's witty turn of phrase in verse 3. The NIV says, 'as it turned out'. The NCV translates, 'It just so happened'. We might re-write it, '**What an amazing coincidence!** Of all the grain fields she could have gathered food from, she went to one owned by a relative of her deceased father-in-law. Was this merely chance?'

Recap

Naomi left a land that was empty, full of the wealth of family, but came back empty. Her husband and sons had died in the land of Moab, an enemy state of the Israelites. By all appearances **God seemed not to favor her at all**. No one would look after widowed Naomi in her old age. She was doomed. Or was she?

She has not yet come to realize that her Moabite daughter-in-law, a foreigner and enemy of the covenant people of God, was to be God's provision for her. Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi and live with her and care for her (Ruth 1^{16,17}). She even abandons the gods of her past and commits to the God of Israel. **This is a book about God loving-kindness, favor, and grace.**

As chapter 2 begins, Ruth has already begun to act as Naomi's provider. She tells her mother-in-law that she is off to collect grain so that they may have food for survival. Naomi is still immobilized by grief and in verse 2 she can only reply with two Hebrew words. Our translation might be one word 'Whatever'. The scene changes to fields of wheat.

Ruth 2:4-7 Community protection and God's goodness

Ancient readers would know that the Laws of Moses protected the poor. Deuteronomy praises God, saying

'He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves foreigners, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were such in Egypt' (Deut. 10^{18,19})

The Old Testament laws¹ made it possible for foreigners and widows and other poor people to go out into the harvest to collect essential grains. Harvesters were prohibited from going back over the field to pick up what was left over. Ruth set out a daybreak to collect sheaves of wheat.

The storyteller keeps a sense of coincidence alive. Verse 4 says, 'Just then...' We might translate this, 'Wouldn't you know it, Boaz turns up!'

The NRSV describes Boaz as a 'prominent rich man'. The two Hebrew words literally mean Mighty Wealthy. However, in this context, point to **strength of character** and **standing in the community**. He is a **noble person**.² Let's read from verse 5...

'Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?" The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi.

¹ Deut. 14^{28,29}, 24¹⁹⁻²², 26¹²⁻¹⁵

² A surprise awaits the reader in chapter 3, for Boaz is going to call Ruth, a woman, a widow, and even more a foreigner, by a similar title in 3:11.

She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter." So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men **not to touch you**. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled."(Ruth 2⁵⁻⁹ NIV)

The story of Ruth and Naomi had got around the town, presumably via the women whom Naomi vented her spleen to in 1¹⁹. Not knowing the rules, Ruth was vulnerable and easy picking for a troop of virile male workers. There's a hint of the trouble in Boaz's protective words, 'I have told the men not to touch you.' It appears that when Boaz arrives, Ruth is leaving after some incident has taken place – perhaps as she went on her own to seek water to drink after her long day of work.

The ancient readers would have known that laws alone do not adequately protect young foreign widows. The minute she headed out from Naomi's presence into the fields the original audience may have gasped. 'You know what's gonna happen to her, don't you?'

Laws merely point out lines and boundaries. At best they point out right from wrong and help to contain iniquity and crime. At worst they merely show how far one has crossed the line. The Laws of Moses didn't change hearts. The New Testament makes it clear that they were **never intended to bring life without faith in God**.³

The Bible moves us on towards a better way, such as in the prophecy of Jeremiah where God promises:

'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' (Jeremiah 31³³)

What a great surprise to the reader, then, that Boaz reacts the way he does. As in the cycle of stories in the times of the Judges, a hero is brought into the picture. However, his words and actions seem way over the top! Sure, he's attracted to her on many levels. She's young. Her story and her tenacious working spirit capture his eye. But his provision for Ruth goes way beyond applying mere justice for a foreigner. Look at the next verses:

Ruth 2:10-16 Signs of God's grace and favour

10 Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" 11 But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-

3 E.g. Galatians 3:21

in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. 12 May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" 13 Then she said, "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants." 14 At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. 15 When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. 16 You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her" (Ruth 2¹⁰⁻¹⁶)

Note in verse 10 that Ruth's response indicates how great and unexpected the care is from Boaz up to the point of verse 9. Now Boaz goes much further. He exceeds the ordinary rights of gleaning by a wide margin. More than this, he invites her to eat the lunchtime meal in the company of his people and to drink from their cups.

The original audience must have thought he was besotted with her up to verse 9, but this is far too much! Something bigger is being suggested in this story. This is teaching us something about God's grace and favour.

There is a play on word in the Hebrew that we can't see in English in verse 10.⁴ Such great attention has been paid to a foreign woman. "As if!"

Boaz praises Naomi for her covenant-like commitment and love for Naomi and suggests that his provisions for her are just reward – proper payment. This is the correct wages for such a days work.

The ancient reader knows that the writer is again pointing to God's *Hesed* love. Faithful, covenantal promise with the reciprocation of mutual respect. Boaz sees himself as God's instrument in some way for this young woman.

'How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God!' says Ps. 36.7,

'And the children of mortals take refuge in the shadow of Your wings.' Ps 36:7

The favor Boaz displays is a symbol of God's '*hesed*' loving-kindness for people.

⁴ Attention, as in 'why pay me such attention?' and 'foreign woman' sound very similar in Hebrew with two opposite meanings of the root *nkr* (*lhkyr* & *nkryh*)

Ruth is given extraordinary grace and favor; privileges from a landowner who treats her like a member the family against all norms. As yet she does not know his true identity.

Ruth 2:17-23 Grace Recognized

When Ruth returns to Naomi with a weeks worth of grain and a story to tell, Naomi is shaken from her grief and awakened to God's care and provision for her. When she learns that this generous provider is her kinsman from her dead husband's family, she is filled with life.

¹⁹ Her 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." ²⁰ Then 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." ²¹ Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest.' " ²² Naomi 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." ²³ So 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' (Ruth 2¹⁹⁻²³)

The reader learns about Boaz's family links in verse 1, but Naomi and Ruth only discover the connection here.

The original reader would know that this supposed chance meeting in the field was a divine appointment. The levirate law stated that when a man died, his nearest relative had the responsibility of marrying his wife and having a son so that the dead man's name would not disappear without a heritage. The law of the *go-el* or the protector is found in Leviticus. It states,

"If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his next of kin shall come and redeem what his brother has sold." It was his duty to act as a redeemer in situations of family need. The relative would be obligated to, at his own expense, buy back the property and give it back to the relative who had sold it" (Leviticus 25²⁵).

Finally, Boaz is seen through the lens of the New Testament's presentation of Jesus of Nazareth as a figure who foreshadows how Christ would redeem us. Christ, the Son of God, became our next of kin by taking on human life. He paid the price in his sacrifice of Himself for us, to re-unite us with the Heavenly Father we are estranged from due to sin.

We are spiritually poor in our story. There is no way that we could gain restore a harmonious relationship with the Holy God who created us, such is the crisis and

disaster of sin. But Christ stood in our stead. The story of Boaz standing in for his deceased relative in the Old Testament's intention to ensure care for the poor points to Christ's greater act.

"Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, For my soul takes refuge in You;
And in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge until destruction passes by"
(Ps 57:1)

"For You have been my help, and in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy. My
soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me" (Ps 63:7-8)

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the
Almighty. I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I
trust!" For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper and from the
deadly pestilence. He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you
may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark" (Ps 91:1-4)

What is it like under the wings of God?

Conclusion

When you think about it, the world we live in isn't so different from the world of the Old Testament. Human relationships are sometimes far from happy far too much of the time. People find it hard to make lasting friendships.

Erich Fromm in a book called 'The Sane Society' observed that 'There is not much love to be found in the world today. There is rather a superficial friendliness concealing a distance, an indifference, a subtle mistrust.' Now, whether we're any different from past generations is hard to tell but the reality is that lasting friendships, even lasting marriages are hard to achieve. People feel isolated, tensions in relationships are commonplace. Ethnic tension, divorce, suicide, are all on the increase. More and more people are living alone, whether by choice or by circumstances. The words of Hosea are as true today as they were in his day "There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed."

But the encouragement that this story of Ruth brings is that you and I can do something about it. We may only be one or two people, but we can make a difference. So often God uses individual believers as the catalyst to bring about change in those around them. What this story has the effrontery to suggest is that a single act of covenant loyalty on the part of a foreign, pagan, widow could be the key to the whole of Israel's future blessing.

So too, we can have a significant effect on the way our world develops by our individual acts of covenant love. That's why Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, that they love one another. There's no more powerful message to this sick world of ours than that it's possible for Christians to love one another with God's covenant love.

Here is Ruth, a young widow, who chooses the precarious ancient situation of not being married, not because she has no choice, but out of love for Naomi and Naomi's people. She could have returned to her own people like Orpah, and would no doubt have been able to remarry and live a normal life, but she gave that up, for the time being at least, in order to care for a lonely, vulnerable person in desperate need of support. You probably know people yourself who have shown, or are showing, that sort of covenant love in their own lives.

We mustn't underestimate the value of such life-giving love in the greater scheme of things. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 10:

"and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple -- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." (Matt. 10⁴² NRSV)

Going Further

Ruth 2:10-16 Who is the hero?

In response to the *gracious protection* and *provision* of Boaz, Ruth follows a common ancient practice of demonstrating *gratitude*. She humbly receives the favour Boaz extends to her.

"At this, Ruth bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me-- a foreigner?"(NIV Ruth 2¹⁰)

Boaz prays two things: that Ruth would be *rewarded* and that Ruth would be *protected*.

"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.**" (Ruth 2¹²)

Ruth *honours* and *praises* Boaz, not just as 'a lord' but now 'my lord', for his *gracious provision*, comforting *protection*, and loving *words*. (Ruth 2:13)

The ancient reader might ask, is this a reference to Boaz or God?

For the modern reader, the New Testament comes into view very clearly in the words and actions of Boaz. If we are called to think theologically by the writer, then we who

know the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and its meaning will find much more in the conversation between Ruth and Boaz than our predecessors.

In this, *Boaz is like Jesus*, who prayed that sinners would be forgiven as he hung upon the cross. Being both God and Human, he answered his own prayer for us. He made possible our eternal forgiveness through his sacrifice for sins.

Ruth 2:17-23 Recognizing God's grace & favour

A recurring theme in Ruth is God's loving-kindness; that 'hesed' love that God consistently offers to humanity. In this chapter, the word 'favour' is most prominent. It is, of course, similar to the New Testament idea of grace.

We must be careful to recognise the culture in which the story is set and see God as hero, not masculinity, nor is this prescriptive of how men and women should act.⁵

While surveying his workers and field, Boaz *notices* Ruth. Why? Because of the beauty of Ruth's *character*.⁶

Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?" The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."(Ruth 2:5-7)

5 Biblical narratives about how women have coped with social constraints are as varied as life itself. Each story describes different circumstances and different responses, often buried in the subtext rather than explicit in the overtly male-oriented narrative. Biblical narratives of females coping with male-imposed constraints, of living meaningful lives within social boundaries or by extending those boundaries, remain inherently relevant to contemporary life. It can be difficult for women today to identify with the female characters of the Bible. Their stories can be confusing: subordinated and yet as independent as Sarah, misunderstood and mistreated as Dinah, heroic and unjustly punished like Miriam. As a woman, I became more interested in how those women were shown to cope with the constraints of their varied social situations: from ancestresses living in tents to Sheba and Esther, for instance, who dwelled in palaces; from the tensions of sibling rivalry as between Jacob's wives to the tensions within ruling families, like those of Athaliah, mother of the king of Judah; from the many nameless women whose deeds are lost to them and to us—to those women who command our attention. Gender subservience is inherently objectionable, but it remains viable to this day, subtly as well as overtly, in culturally determined patterns. Norman Gottwald suggests that the "stigmatization of menstruation as a 'blemish' strengthened the marginalization of women in public and cultic roles..." (Gottwald's italics); *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 478. Ruth is the widowed daughter-in-law of Naomi. Through Ruth, Naomi becomes the ancestress of David, King of Israel. (Adapted from the writing of Lilian Klein)

6 Women are occasionally honored in the Bible, but they are so often marginalized at the same time; rivalry among women often receives a different kind of attention than rivalry among men (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003 by Lilian Klein)

Boaz takes responsibility to **protect** her.

So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled."(NIV) Ruth 2:8-9

In response to the **gracious protection** and **provision** of Boaz, Ruth follows a common eastern mode of demonstrating **gratitude** and humbly receives his favour.

"At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me-- a foreigner?"(NIV) Ruth 2:10)

Boaz prays two things; that Ruth would be **rewarded** and that Ruth would be **protected**.

*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.**" (Ruth 2:12)*

In this, **Boaz has a divine attitude**, like Jesus who prayed that sinners would be forgiven while hanging on the cross, and then died to answer His own prayer and enable forgiveness.

Putting ourselves in the shoes of original ancient audience of the Book of Ruth can be difficult. The author often chooses key words that alert the audience to a broader theological lesson. Chapter 2 begins: "Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of wealth..." The NIV description of Boaz as a man of 'wealth' could be misleading. The Hebrew word means 'a man of valor' and speaks of integrity. It is used in the Bible of Gideon, Jephthah and the like and points to moral worth and strength of character. It is a word used later in this story by Boaz to commend Ruth (3:11). Ruth may have considered a coincidental meeting with a man called Boaz as a matter of happy chance. However, the reader is given a clue that there is a bigger plan. The importance of 'family' is undeniable in tribal Judaism (not unlike indigenous Australians in our time). But it is also a signal in this text to recognize God's covenant love and His purposes to establish his 'family' by faith. There is a bigger picture behind the drama of Boaz and Ruth that speaks of God's loving-kindness to us and the appropriate response God desires.

God's Favor

Ruth's story points to God's favor and the unfolding plan of salvation for all people. Note the opening words of Ruth in this chapter:

‘And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor.”’

Naomi is still in deep depression. Her family is dead. She has no provider. She has no future. She says just two Hebrew words in response to Naomi. In our day, she might have said, ‘Whatever.’

Through the provision of personal needs, God is at work governing and sustaining his world (Ps. 104:5-30). This is not a fatally ordered world, but a contingent world, reminding us of our continued and continuous dependence on God’s sustaining grace.

Listen to Naomi’s theological reflection on the day’s events in vs. 20:

"The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead."

Ruth’s responsiveness, with humility, reminds us of a story told by Jesus- the prodigal (not the waywardness of the son, but his humble acceptance of grace where it was otherwise not due).

We learn that God is there, God cares, God rules and God provides.

Gleaning something from chapter 2

It seems that there is some faithfulness in the land still, even if it takes someone like Ruth to bring it out. Boaz makes sure that she's looked after and protected and at the end of the day she returns to Naomi with a good sized sack of grain. And the first part of our story finishes with Ruth living with Naomi, safe and to some extent provided for.

Ruth leaves the security of her homeland to care for a grieving, bitter, old woman. Jesus Christ leaves the glory of heaven to die a lonely, bitter death on a cross. Meaningless sacrifice? Or world changing acts of love?

It's not for nothing that Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow him. His sacrifice changed the very present and future of our lives.

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