

Redeeming Ruth, week 2 God's Hand in Our Luck (Ruth 2:1–13)

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... she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz ...

— Ruth 2:3b

For the first time, the human hero of the book of Ruth, Boaz, steps onto the stage. His name means “strength” and he rises above the previous weak men in the book as the dude of dudes. Illustratively, his name also appears on one of the pillars in Solomon’s Temple (1 Samuel 9:1; 1 Kings 11:28; 2 Kings 5:1; Nehemiah 11:14). This is fitting because he is a man with enough masculine strength to hold up Ruth and Naomi so that their life would not crumble around them. We are told that Boaz is a distant relative in some way through the family of Elimelech, Naomi’s deceased husband. Furthermore, he is spoken of as “a worthy man,” which is used throughout Scripture to refer to men of wealth (2 Kings 15:20), war (Joshua 6:2–3; Judges 6:12; 2 Samuel 17:8), and wherewithal (1 Samuel 9:1; 1 Kings 11:28; 2 Kings 5:1; Nehemiah 11:14). Boaz continually displays such impeccable character, blessing everyone in the story, that many have called him a “type” of Jesus Christ. The great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon affectionately referred to Jesus as “our glorious Boaz.”

With the two women likely very hungry and desperately in need of food, Ruth asks her mother-in-law, Naomi, for her approval to glean in the fields. In this request, we see that the women have hit the proverbial rock bottom. Ruth is taking a great risk, venturing out in faith as a foreign woman to scavenge for food in a new town.

Scripture has much to say regarding the poor. There are both righteous and unrighteous poor people. The righteous poor include those who are widows (like Ruth and Naomi), orphans, sick, elderly, immigrants, and hard-working people who struggle to make ends meet, even our Lord Jesus. The unrighteous poor include those who are poor because of sin, such as laziness, drunkenness, and foolish spending, as illustrated throughout Proverbs. God has an affectionate concern for the righteous poor and gives repeated and clear instructions throughout Scripture for how His people are to lovingly and mercifully meet the physical needs of those who are righteous poor. For example, God’s people in the Old Testament were to allow the poor an opportunity to obtain food through the honest labor of gleaning (Leviticus 19:9–10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19–22). The equivalent today would be someone recycling cans to pay for groceries, or volunteering at the food bank in exchange for groceries.

The big idea behind gleaning was that the earth belonged to the Lord and that God’s people were required to share some of His provision with the poor as an act of His merciful provision for them. In giving the poor an opportunity to work for their food, God was also granting them a measure of dignity. This principle is to be continued today by God’s people as they share their blessings from God with others in need, especially orphans and widows, which would include the growing number of single mothers in our culture.

In Ruth’s request to glean, we see that she is a woman of noble character, like the woman of Proverbs 31. She is not prone to complaining, but rather works

hard in the midst of a difficult season of life. Furthermore, she trusts the providential hand of God to permit her to “find favor” in someone’s eyes.

Naomi, perhaps with some reservation for the woman she has come to love as her own daughter, agrees and Ruth ventures out in faith to find a field in which to glean food for them. She finds herself in the fields of Boaz.

The way in which this is stated is very unusual and unprecedented in all of Scripture. It essentially says that Ruth got “lucky” or by “chance” and “coincidence” found herself “fortunately” in the field of Boaz. The phraseology is so peculiar it has led to much speculation about what the author was intending. Indeed, the author is using an ironic tone in order to grab our attention and turn our focus to the invisible hand of God’s providence in the daily affairs of ordinary people. Ruth arrived at the field of Boaz not because an angel led her, or a voice spoke to her from heaven, or any other miraculous occurrence. Instead, we see that God’s invisible hand was working through Ruth’s decision about which field in which to glean.

In Acts 17:26 Paul says that it is ultimately God who determines where and when we live. By peering beneath the loom of our lives, we often see what appears to be various knots of free will and choice, but by peering above the loom, as God does, we see that He was weaving nothing less than a meaningful and orderly tapestry. Conversely, Scripture rebukes those who trust in or give credit to the false god Fortune when it is God’s providence that orders the affairs of our life (Isaiah 65:11).

Adding to the irony, we witness that not only was Ruth in the field of Boaz, but she, by providence, also happened to be there when he was making the rounds to examine his business venture. We then hear the first words of Boaz in the story, and they are a brief prayer for his employees, that God’s hand of providence would be with them. Echoing the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24, his workers likewise respond with a brief prayer that God would bless their boss.

To modern ears, this exchange seems especially peculiar; very rarely does a boss walk into his business to hear priestly blessings showered upon him from various cubicles. Boaz was apparently a man who was an evangelist and pastor to his workers. He loved and cared for them so well that they spoke well of him and prayed to God for him. In blending his work and worship, Boaz appears as a man of great godliness who not only blesses everyone in the book, but is also spoken well of by everyone.

While surveying his workers and field, Boaz notices Ruth. Not knowing who she is, he asks, “Whose young woman is this?” His servant speaks well of her as a woman of character who had been working hard all day to provide for herself and her mother-in-law. Despite the fact that Ruth was both sweaty and dirty, in addition to not being a virgin, not being a Hebrew, not being from a good family, not being a seasoned worshipper of God, and not even having food to eat, Boaz possibly fell in love at first sight. Why? Because of the beauty of Ruth’s character as a woman who had great faith in God and great faithfulness to people, as demonstrated by her labors to provide for Naomi.

Meeting for the first time, Boaz initiates a conversation with Ruth. Clearly a leader, Boaz speaks with both care and counsel, addressing her as “my daughter.” His words likely reveal that Boaz is older than Ruth and that because she has no father, husband, or brother, he was taking responsibility to protect her, much like Paul tells men to likewise treat “younger women like sisters, in all

purity” (1 Timothy 5:2). While God’s law commanded Boaz to allow Ruth to glean in his field, he went far beyond the law and extended grace to Ruth. He put her in community with other women, told her how to receive the most food from his field, ordered the young men not to harass her in any way, and provided water to quench her thirst, all as an act of honor and loving concern.

In short, Boaz was exceedingly gracious to Ruth. He was the answer to the hope of her heart that God would direct her to “him in whose sight I shall find favor.” Furthermore, Boaz and Ruth appear to be an equal yoking; both are more concerned with their responsibilities to others than with their own rights—Ruth cares for Naomi and Boaz cares for Ruth.

In response to the gracious protection and provision of Boaz, Ruth follows a common eastern mode of demonstrating gratitude and humbly receives his favor. Without tipping his hand, the author paints a lovely picture of Boaz as a respectable man with character like Jesus’, and Ruth as a blessed and cared for woman who respects him easily. One is left to wonder if romance and marriage are not dawning in what has thus far been a dark season of hardship for Ruth.

Furthermore, with penetrating, humble insight, Ruth inquires of Boaz why he is being so generously kind to her. Does he want to sleep with her? Does he want to take advantage of her? Does he want to manipulate her? Or, are his actions truly favor, or grace, to her?

Boaz answers Ruth’s question by publicly praising her character as a woman with faith in God and faithfulness to her mother-in-law. Boaz also prays to God for her, despite having only known her briefly, and asks that God would reward and protect her. Boaz’s prayer is one of many in the book; each are prayed for someone else and all are answered by the conclusion of the book (1:8–9; 2:12, 20; 3:10; 4:11–2, 14).

Two things are most curious about the prayer of Boaz for Ruth. First, not only does Boaz pray that Ruth would be rewarded by God for her faithfulness, but he also answers his own prayer. In this, Boaz is 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. Second, Boaz includes a common theme from the Psalms as part of his prayer for Ruth. Boaz essentially refers to Ruth as a lovely but vulnerable small bird that God has taken under His proverbial wing. This figurative word-picture is a heart-warming reminder that God does not use His proverbial wings to fly from us, but rather cover us that we might have safety (Psalm 17:8), refuge (Psalm 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 91:4), and joy (Psalm 63:7).

Ruth then speaks to Boaz, honoring and praising him, not just as “a lord” but now “my lord,” for his gracious provision, comforting protection, and loving words. He gave this lavish grace despite the fact that she was not even worthy of the treatment of one of his lowly servant girls.

In conclusion, we see that although Ruth was a despised Moabite who had worshipped a false god (Deuteronomy 7:1–4; 1 Kings 11:1–2) called Chemosh (Numbers 21:29; 1 Kings 11:7), God both saved her and blessed her. God did this through His invisible hand of providence that was made visible through the hand of Boaz, a masculine man of honor who walked hand-in-hand with God. Likewise, to God we are each Moabites—outcasts, idolaters, and unworthy of grace or favor. But just as Boaz came to his field to speak with and care for Ruth, so Jesus,

our great Boaz, came to His earth to give us gracious favor and take us under His proverbial wing.

Verses for next week: Ruth 2:14–23