

Redeeming Ruth, week 3
God's Hand in Our Blessing (Ruth 2:14–23)

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“May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!”

— Ruth 2:20

At this point in the book of Ruth, the main characters are Naomi/Mara, the bitter but not entirely hopeless mother-in-law; Ruth, the single, godly, hardworking, new believer; and Boaz, the unmarried, godly, successful businessman whose field Ruth “happened” to end up gleaning. This week we again see that, in Boaz, God providentially answers Ruth’s heart’s desire to be blessed with favor in the eyes of someone (2:2).

The story of Ruth and Boaz, which is arguably the greatest love story in all of Scripture, is incredibly important in light of the cultural makeup of our nation, city, and church. Nationally, the number of unmarried people was 36 percent in 1970, 39 percent in 1980, 41 percent in 1990, 44 percent in 2000, and in 2006, for the first time in history, exceeded 50 percent of the adult population. Both men and women are waiting longer to marry for the first time; the median age for men went from 23 in 1950 to 27 in 2003, and the median age for women jumped from 20 to 25 in that same period. This also explains such phenomena as the fifteen million members of eharmony.com and other online dating services.

The increasing number of older singles has in many ways reshaped the entire social landscape. A 2006 report on NPR said that 80 percent of Americans are sexually active by age 20, and only 20 percent of women marry as virgins. Furthermore, cohabitation increased 72 percent between 1990 and 2000, and the cohabitation rate increased ten-fold between 1960 and 2000. Fully 41 percent of Americans will cohabit at some point, and according to the 2000 Census the cohabitation rate in Seattle is 250 percent higher than the national average. This is due in part to the fact that Seattle has the fifth largest concentration of twenty-five- to thirty-nine-year-old college-educated singles in the country, and is one of the least churched American cities with more dogs than Christians or children.

At Mars Hill Church we are comprised of roughly half married and half unmarried people, which is very unusual for any church, especially a church of our size. According to researcher John Vaughan, most large churches (two thousand or more people) have less than 20 percent singles. For us, Ruth is an amazingly timely book because it focuses on an older single man, Boaz, and a single woman, Ruth, who is younger but likely not very young since she had been married for ten years before being widowed. In the story, God is the Hero who works through providence, but Ruth and Boaz are also heroes in that they are godly singles through whom God works out His providence. They are wonderful examples for us all, especially those of us who are unmarried.

After being exceedingly gracious and kind to Ruth in both word and deed, Boaz continues to expand his generosity to her. In so doing, Boaz is the first among God’s people to not only tolerate Ruth the Moabite, but he also elevates her social status to that of a godly and respected member of their society, with

dignity and honor of the highest rank because she has become a new woman in her conversion to God. Despite the fact that she is a poor immigrant humbly laboring for her survival, Boaz invites her to feast with him and his employees. Furthermore, Boaz himself serves her, which, like Jesus' own example, demonstrates an amazing humility and gentlemanly chivalry. Ruth was blessed to eat perhaps the finest meal she had enjoyed in some time. After she was full, she was given additional food for herself and her mother-in-law, Naomi. In Ruth 1:6 we read that God had blessed His people with food, and in Boaz's actions we witness a man who truly understands the grace of God; Boaz treats both his employees and Ruth in the same gracious manner that God has treated him.

As if his lavish treatment of Ruth was not enough, Boaz again goes beyond the letter of the Old Testament law all the way to grace. In a masculine and noble gesture, Boaz guarantees the safety of Ruth. He also assigns her a most advantageous place from which to glean, and on top of that orders that she be ensured a very generous provision from him.

Also demonstrating remarkable character, Ruth continues her day of hard labor until the evening darkness falls upon her. The ephah of barley she received from Boaz and her day's labor is an amount that scholars debate, but is perhaps four to six gallons, or some thirty to fifty pounds that she carried home. In our modern day this would be the equivalent of perhaps a few weeks' wages or a few thousand dollars for one day's work!

Arriving home, Ruth gives the leftover food from her lunch with Boaz and his employees to Naomi, who was likely very hungry. Excited by God's provision for both their dinner and the riches Ruth obtained from her day's work, Naomi simply had to know which man had been so kind to her. Ruth reveals that the gracious provision of God had come to them through the hand of Boaz, the man of wealth and war and wherewithal.

Overjoyed, the bitter Naomi, who has not lost all faith, prays that God would bless both Boaz for his kindness to her and the name of her family, which had suffered greatly. In her prayer, Naomi speaks of the "kindness" of God by using the word *hesed*, which is an important theme throughout the book. It summarizes all of God's most beloved attributes, such as love, grace, mercy, kindness, compassion, patience, and devotion. It is occasionally used to describe godly people who reflect the character of God, such as Ruth and Boaz. The debate among scholars on this verse is whether Naomi is saying that God or Boaz has acted in a way of *hesed*. The truth is that both are accurate—God has acted kindly through the providential kindness of Boaz.

Naomi foreshadows the remainder of the book by informing Ruth that Boaz is in fact a relative, somehow connected to them through her deceased husband, Elimelech (see also 2:1). Subsequently, Boaz was qualified to be a "redeemer" for the women.

In the Old Testament, the redeemer was a relative who could redeem people and property. If someone sold themselves into slavery/servitude to pay off a debt, the redeemer was the family member who could purchase their freedom (Leviticus 25:35–55). If a widow was in need, the redeemer would care for them (Ruth 4:4–10). If someone was murdered, the redeemer would avenge the crime (Numbers 35:9–34). Regarding property, if someone was going to lose their land because of poverty, the redeemer was the family member who could save the land by paying off the debt (Leviticus 25:23–34).

What is curious about Naomi's statement is that her words are true in the spirit but not the letter of the law. Boaz in fact had no legal obligation to Ruth because she was not a blood relative like Naomi. But because Naomi loved Ruth so dearly, she considered her a daughter and expected her to be treated as such. Furthermore, in her conversion it seems that Ruth is no longer to be seen as anything less than a fully respected and cared for member of God's people.

Ruth then explains that Boaz had appointed himself as not only her provider, but also her defender and protector for the remainder of the harvest. This would have been a period of perhaps six to seven weeks between late April and early June. In light of the amazing provision she received from one day's labor in Boaz's field, his invitation to continue on for the rest of the harvest was essentially an opportunity for her to make enough to care for her and Naomi for the entire year in less than a few months.

With wise maternal counsel, Naomi encourages Ruth to stay close to Boaz and his workers because he is a godly and safe man. So, the women settle into a routine of sorts and Ruth continues working until the harvest comes to an end. By that time, the relationship of Boaz and Ruth seems to have cooled; they are not pursuing any sort of official romantic interest. Time is running out for a fairytale ending. The suspense sets the stage for the next scene of the book, where she "pulls a Ruth" on the threshing floor.

In closing, the hero of this section is ultimately illustrated in the Hero of all of Scripture, Jesus Christ. As Spurgeon said, Jesus is "our glorious Boaz" who came to His earth to look upon us with love and care for us though He had no obligation to do so. Jesus is also our *hesed*, extended to us as a gift from God for our eternal life, much like the *hesed* that was given to sustain the life of Ruth. And, like Boaz, Jesus is our great redeemer who died to pay our debt of sin, thereby redeeming both us and, one day, the earth.

Verses for next week: Ruth 3:1–18