

RUTH 2: Hope in Providence

Grab your Bibles and open them up to **Ruth 2**. We started the Book of Ruth last week by looking at the two streams which form the river of suffering: choices and circumstances. In the case of Ruth and Naomi, we saw how the difficult situation that they found themselves in was a result of the poor choices of Elimelech (to move away from the protection of God's people), as well as Mahlon and Chilion (who decided that they knew better than God and would marry Moabite women). These mistakes were not immediately destructive, but mixed with circumstantial difficulty (the death of all the men), these women were left in a frustratingly bleak position. Naomi was an older widow in a foreign land, Ruth was a younger widow who would have been branded damaged due the fact that she married an Israelite. Remember this was before Starbucks was around to employee fifty percent of single moms (that stat is made up).

With limited options of what to do, these two women react in very different ways. Stuck in a bad situation that was not their fault, Ruth and Naomi take differing outlooks on the situation. Naomi allows the situation to determine her perspective. The situation is bad, so life is bad, God is bad, call me Bitter. Ruth lets her hope in God define the moment. She casts off her rights and clings to Naomi, for what is most likely a worse situation than the one she was already in. Ruth's hope is founded in what she already knows about God...she has no idea what the future holds, but she hopes. To hope in the Lord and act involves a trust that He will guide your steps. It includes believing that He is in control of the moment, even if that moment is incredibly horrific. The belief that a God of redemption can make a beautiful picture out of ANY situation. Today's story helps to illustrate to us why we also can have hope in the providence (or absolute control of all things) of God.

CHANCE MEETING

Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech. And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you!" And they answered, "The Lord bless you."

The last verse of chapter 1 clued us in to the fact that changes were coming; that there were better times ahead: *And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.* What seems like a throw-away line is actually quite important. In Israel, the Barley Harvest was begun with the celebration of Passover. Which means that Naomi and Ruth are returning to God's people as they are celebrating both God's provision in the harvest as well as God's redemption in the Passover; all of this in Bethlehem. So Naomi, the Lord is against me, returns home to the reminder of God's salvation in the PAST, as the Passover was a celebration of God's rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt. If you know the story, the people of Israel marked the doorposts of their home with lamb's blood, so that the angel of death would pass over (hence the name) their homes as he killed the firstborn of every house. Pharaoh then relented and the people of Egypt then sent the Israelites away carrying all the loot they could hold to freedom. This is a reminder of God's providential hand at work. They have a history that teaches them how God takes a baby in a basket, called by a burning bush, with a staff that turns into a snake, and weaves it into a great salvation.

Additionally, it is harvest time. So Naomi and Ruth are coming back to the land as the land is in abundance. They come in to Bethlehem as it is overflowing. In agrarian societies the times of harvest are marked with great celebrations and feasts. This is a time of joy, because at this point there is not worry. In the tilling, planting, watering, there is always the concern that the crops will not produce, but harvest time is the opportunity to look out on what is there; to celebrate having. This is an assurance of God's provision. He will give us what we need.

This is all taking place in Bethlehem. Looking back it is strange to see other things occurring in a little town that has become known almost exclusively for the birth of Jesus Christ. As we will see this place, AND THESE PEOPLE, play significantly into the plan that God is unfolding to bring ultimate healing to the earth. This is a lesson for us in how God's providence in the present is Him working things out for a future plan. Nothing is just happening. This is not just a family history; it is a portrait of how God works. He pulls back the curtain for us in this story to show us His divine hand in what may seem to us as less than divine things.

It continues into the first verse of chapter 2, where there seems to be this half hazard character introduction: *Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.* It is strange because the story quickly moves away from him, before coming back to him as the owner of the field that Ruth just **happened to come to**. The phrase used here is tongue and cheek. The author is telling us, remember that guy that I all so awkwardly introduced a few verses ago, well, of all of the fields in Bethlehem, in the many places she could have gone, she JUST HAPPENED to end up in His field. He is, as we will see, one of the few people who could help Naomi and Ruth out of their rut, and, what a coincidence, this is where she finds herself. The author highlights the fact that numerous variables would have to happen in order for such an optimistic situation to present itself. What luck...OR NOT.

Which brings us to the question, what is Ruth doing going into random people's fields in the first place? Ruth is taking part of a social services program called gleaning. This was specifically commanded by God in **Deuteronomy 24.19-22**:

*When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. **You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.***

God set up gleaning for a few reasons then. The **first** was as an act of worship to God, honoring Him by obeying His commands. A field owner would be giving up some of his profits and yield in order to follow this ordinance; it required dedication and trust in the Lord to practice it. The **second** reason was that gleaning was a way to care for those who were in difficult situations: the sojourner, the fatherless, the widow. God specifically set up a system so that people like Ruth and Naomi would not be helpless, but would have a way to meet some of their needs. The **third** reason is that gleaning is meant to recall the slavery of Egypt. Gleaning was given to God's people as a protection against forgetting that while they had enough now, with their fields producing, THE ONLY REASON this is the case is because of God's grace to them. Without Him they would be slaves in Egypt.

What is interesting is that if you read through your Bible, you will find gleaning mentioned just a few times: as a command in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, as a metaphor in Isaiah and Jeremiah, and HERE. This is the one place in the Bible where we see gleaning practiced and as part of the narrative. Why is this important? Because we are talking about the providence of God. We are talking about how God sets things in motion over here, that actually come into play over here. How many characters in the Bible are there that could legitimately call themselves a widowed, fatherless, sojourner? There is one: RUTH. She is the embodiment of what gleaning was created for...you might even say that God created gleaning for Ruth. It is not a coincidence that gleaning is here for her. It is not a good thing that God set that up so that Ruth could have a way of making a living. God set up gleaning specifically for the purpose of bringing Ruth to the field of Boaz.

We have seen how God has prepared Ruth and worked together the intricate parts of the story to bring her here, but who is Boaz and how has God been working in His life?

The first thing that we know about Boaz is that he is a worthy man. He is a man of high character. This is illustrated for us in the way that he addresses the reapers: *And he said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you!" And they answered, "The Lord bless you."*

You have to understand the massive distinctions in social status here. As much as we decry the growing separation between the rich and poor in this country, in ancient cultures that distinction went well beyond financial disparity. The poor were unclean. They were not worthy of being treated like human beings. To have a wealthy land owner proclaiming blessings and concern for those gleaning his fields reveals that he has an outlook that is counter-cultural. The nature of his greeting shows us where this comes from. It is not simply: 'may good things come your way,' OR 'best of luck to you,' OR 'I hope you have a good day'...it was *The Lord be with you!* Boaz believes in a God who is present and at work in the world.

As we said before, this is also shown by the fact that he practices gleaning in the first place. He takes seriously the law of God, to his own detriment. Remember this is during the times of the Judges, when everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, and here stands an honest, hard-working, faithful man. What sets him apart?

Flip over to Matthew chapter 1. The New Testament begins with a recap of the Old Testament. This refresher is given to us in the form of a genealogy. Now these lists of who begat who are often places we skim through quickly to get back to story and direct teaching, mainly because we have no idea who these people are, so who their father was and their son was is of no concern to us. But every once in while a name pops up and then we look at the names around it, and it connects things that previously have seemed separate...like a puzzle coming together. This is exactly what happens here, in verse 5 (spoiler alert):

and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king.

Boaz is not like many other characters who come out of obscurity and then disappear again. Instead, the story of Boaz's mum, Rahab is well known. Back when Israel was first coming into the Promised Land, in Joshua 2, they sent spies forward to scope out the land. They sent them to Jericho, which was the most fortified city in the area. These two spies somehow (another coincidence) end up at the house of a God-fearing prostitute (which I am not here to argue how that was possible). As the men of Jericho come to her door looking for the visitors, she hides them and lies to protect them, putting her own life in jeopardy. She pleads with the spies to spare her and her family as the reward for her help. They agree, and when Joshua fights the battle of Jericho and the walls come tumbling down, there is one part left standing, the dwelling of Rahab. Joshua has the spies go in and bring her out. It says in **Joshua 6.25**:

But Rahab the prostitute and her father's household and all who belonged to her, Joshua saved alive. And she has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Rahab was not just saved from death, but she was adopted into the people of God because of her faith. She married an Israelite man named Salmon, and had a son named Boaz. And when that man grew up, he became a worthy man who had a care and concern for those who were the destitute outsiders of society. And how could he not, that was where he came from. In order to have Boaz here in the story, god had to change the heart of a Canaanite prostitute, have her risk her life, crash down an entire city wall, leaving just the tower she was in, and have her meet an upstanding Jewish man (many people believe that Salmon was actually one of the spies). But just

like the barley harvest and gleaning, the existence of Boaz is not just here to enlighten the past and give context for the present; it is also to look forward to the future.

The genealogy in Matthew 1 is not just any family history...it is the lineage of Jesus Christ. So numerous events had to happen to get us here, the story of Ruth happens to bring about the birth of the savior. For Ruth and Boaz this is not about bringing forth the Messiah, they are simply acting living their lives, but see how God uses this, **v.5**:

GRACE NOT MERIT

Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.' So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest."

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn." Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" Then she said, "I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants."

And at mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

Ruth goes out to glean the fields. This is not easy work, harvesting by hand is strenuous, but gleaners are harvesting what is left behind, which means they are trying find what is left, you have to work twice as hard for half the gain. Ruth puts her head down and works...all of a sudden there is a guy pointing at her and asking questions. As a Moabite, she would have been worried about being singled out, taken advantage of. Being a young woman out in the fields was not entirely safe.

So the man approaches her, but instead of being creepy, he is kind. He offers her:

1. protection: he warns the men to stay away from her
2. water: the men will get some for you when you need it
3. lunch: she gets the workers lunch
4. easier work: he lets her glean among the sheaves that have not been picked over, and goes so far as to tell his men to drop what they have gathered for her to pick up

Ruth left in the morning looking for a field in which she would not get kicked out by the owner or worse. She now finds herself the recipient of such grace, she barely knows what to do; she is beside herself. She asks the question we all want to know: Why would he treat her like this? She says:

Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?

Boaz's answer is not to play off how wonderfully gracious he is. Instead, he sees himself as acting on behalf of God to reward the faith of Ruth. Like his mother with the spies, he says your faith in God should be rewarded. So as Ruth lays with her face to the ground in humility and asks: why would you treat me so well, I don't deserve it. He says, because you have acknowledged that you don't deserve it. Your actions toward Naomi reveal that you value God above your own life, and He has placed me in your life to bless that trust. You have taken refuge under the wing of God, and He loves and takes care of His children. Boaz actions reveal his trust in God, Ruth's dedication to Naomi has shown where her heart lies, and now through these two Naomi's eyes will be opened to God's providence, **v.17**:

So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. And she took it up and went into the city. Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied. And 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 man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz." And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers." And Ruth the Moabite said, "Besides, he said to me, 'You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.'" And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted." So she kept 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 works out the rest of her day and comes home to Naomi with a load: several weeks worth of food. You can imagine the reaction, at the beginning of the chapter when Ruth had proclaimed: I'm going out to glean, Naomi's response was: *Go, my daughter*, basically good luck with that. But now as she looks at the overwhelming pile of food in front of her, *where did you glean today?* Ruth tells her and it is in that moment that it all comes together for Naomi. She begins to see all of the pieces from the past aligning to form the present and it gives her a hope for the future: *one of our redeemers*. God has been working in all of their lives, but it takes people in her life for her to finally recognize God's providence, and she cries out: [His] *kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!* She is not talking about Boaz there, she is praising the kindness of the almighty God who is blessing them through this redeemer.

We to have a redeemer who has taken us from a place of absolute helplessness to a place where we have been given much more than we deserve. Jesus Christ, the reason for all of the details we talked about today, the ultimate purpose of God's providential work, came and died to conquer our sin. To purchase us back from the death that we had earned. All of the good things that we have done have simply worked us further and further from Him. But he had a plan, the plan that we see working out through Ruth and Boaz, to overcome the great distance between us and Him.

In order to receive all of this, He asks us simply to humble ourselves, trust His providence, and to take refuge in His strength. This removes a huge weight from our shoulders, the weight of doubt:

1. the doubt of worthiness: am I good enough? God answers: you are good because I make you good.
2. the doubt of purpose: What can I do for the kingdom? God answers: you are my chosen instruments.
3. the doubt of security: what's next? God answers: its in my hand.

As Christians we must manifest a confidence built out of the security we have in Christ. It doesn't mean we don't struggle, but we must not be tossed too and fro by every wave, we are to be people who are defined by our otherness. People who like Ruth and Boaz in this story, have a

worthiness that comes from their relationship with God. A difference in us that comes from the grace that we KNOW has been poured into our lives. We must watch our fields for those people that God brings into our lives: those who need to be introduced to Jesus, those who need to be reminded of Jesus, and those who simply need to be encouraged in Jesus.

As we come together every Sunday we celebrate Communion which is for those who have recognized the sacrifice of Jesus and placed their hope in Him. If you are not a Christian, this meal is not for you. It is for the weak who recognize themselves weak, the humble who feel unworthy, the tired who need to be refreshed. Come to the table and remember the providential God we serve, who redeemed at the cross, sustains us now, and who promises to continue to transform and purify us until we come to be with Him.

What a good God we serve!