

Ruth 2:1-16 (Week 3 Handout)

RUTH GLEANS IN BOAZ'S FIELDS



1. And then Along Comes Boaz... (Ruth 2:1)

The first chapter of Ruth ends with Ruth and Naomi back in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. The second chapter begins with the introduction of a new character, Boaz. Boaz is a relative of Naomi's deceased husband Elimelek. Israel was divided into twelve distinct tribes, and tribes were separated into clans, and among each clan would be an extended family. Elimelek and Boaz were part of the same clan, perhaps Ephrathah (see Ruth 1:2 and Micah 5:2).

The exact relationship is unknown, but the fact that Boaz is a relative of Naomi's deceased husband becomes a central part of the plot in the second half of the story as it relates to the idea of redemption and providing an heir for a deceased relative. More on that subject in future classes.

Boaz: A Man of Great Strength

The various translations of Ruth 2:1 describe Boaz as a "man of standing" (NIV), "a wealthy and influential man" (NLT), "a worthy man" (ESV), "a prominent man" (Berean Study Bible), "a mighty man of wealth" (KJV), or "a prominent man of noble character" (HCSB).

These various phrases translate a particular Hebrew word (*chayil*) that includes all of these meaning and more. It can describe military power, wealth, influence, and ability. Linguistically, the original of Boaz is somewhat debated. "In him is strength," "In the strength of," and "Of sharp mind" are all plausible options for the meaning behind his name.

One clue that might shed light on this is the fact that one of the two large pillars outside the entrance to God's Temple in Jerusalem was named Boaz (see 2 Chron. 3:17). When 70 scholars were commissioned to translate the Old Testament from Hebrew into the more widely-read Greek a few centuries before Christ, they chose a word for "strength, power, or might" as the translation of Boaz in **2 Chronicles 3:17**. These scholars, fluent in Hebrew and Greek, understood "Boaz" to be a reference to strength and ability.

Reflection Question #1: If you read Ruth as a Gospel story (or perhaps an extended parable) about God, people, and our journey of faith, who might Boaz represent? Who might Ruth and Naomi represent?

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO RUTH • RUTH 2:1-16

Boaz has a Complicated Backstory.

The book of Ruth doesn't tell us much about Boaz's past, other than his family connection to Naomi's deceased husband. The biggest clue about his past comes from the genealogy of Jesus, specifically **Matthew 1:5-6**:

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David."



*The Harlot of Jericho and the Two Spies,
James Tissot, c. 1896-1902, Public Domain*

The most interesting detail in that passage is the fact that Boaz's mother was Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who helped deliver the city of Jericho into the hands of Joshua and the people of Israel during the conquest.

Boaz's mother was a foreigner whose faith in the Lord allowed her to become fully included in the people of God, despite her status as an outsider in more ways than one. Perhaps this is part of the reason why Boaz is so quick to welcome Ruth, the ultimate outsider.

Reflection Question #2: How does Boaz's family history and connections help explain his actions in the book of Ruth?

2. Ruth Gleans in Boaz's Fields (Ruth 2:2-3)

Now that the harvest season had finally arrived in Bethlehem, it was time for local farmers (like Boaz) to hire workers to pick their crops. In **Ruth 2:2-3**, Ruth decides that gleaning in the fields was her best and only shot at finding food for Naomi and herself. Naomi agrees with the plan, and Ruth sets out with the hopes of finding favor (grace) in the eyes of a local farm owner.



What was Gleaning all About?

In Bible times, there was a big difference between harvesting and gleaning. At harvest time, farmers would hire laborers to go through their fields to pick the crops and bundle them up. The faster they worked and the less they wasted, the more profit for the farmer. Their loyalty was to the landowners who paid their wages and demanded a high level of productivity.

Gleaners, on the other hand, were not paid workers at all. They were there out of desperation. They followed behind the paid laborers and picked up leftovers off the ground. It was their right, under Israelite law, to keep these leftovers, with nothing owed to the owner. If you were desperately poor, this was a last resort designed to prevent you from starving to death.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO RUTH • RUTH 2:1-16

Where Does The Concept of Gleaning Come From?

Every Israelite during the Exodus story was a gleaner. During their years of wandering in the wilderness, they experienced a sort of famine that made it nearly impossible to stay well fed. And this quickly turned into a source of consternation for the people of God:

“In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.” Exodus 16:2-3.

God, in his unending mercy, sent manna from Heaven to feed his people. Each day (except for the Sabbath), God would make this manna available, and all of Israel would go out to “gather” it (literally “glean” it) and keep it for the day (see **Exodus 16:4**). This is the first example of gleaning in the Bible, and all of Israel took part in it.

The Law of Moses’ Generous Protections for Outsiders

Israel’s laws were very generous to and protective of outsiders. There were several laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus that commanded Israel to be generous to the poor, to protect orphans and widows, and to welcome foreigners (e.g. **Deut 10:14-19, Lev. 19:9-10, and Deut. 24:19-22**). Taken together, these passages form a baseline of generosity that Boaz would have been expected to follow as it relates to Ruth's desire to glean in his fields.

In **Deuteronomy 10**, God teaches Israel that the earth and everything in it (like the crops that farmers grow) belongs to him. Furthermore, God defends the cause of the orphans and widows, and loves the foreigners in Israel by providing them with food and clothing. Israel, for their part,



The Gathering of the Manna by James Tissot, c. 1896-1902. Public Domain.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO RUTH • RUTH 2:1-16

was expected “to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt” (**Deut. 10:19**).

In **Leviticus 19:9-10** and **Deuteronomy 24:19-22**, God gives Israel the specific instructions regarding gleaning. The leftovers are to be left in place for “the poor and the foreigners” (**Leviticus 19:10**), which describes Ruth and Naomi perfectly. Deuteronomy 24:19-2 includes orphans and widows in its description of gleaners, which also fits Ruth and Naomi (both of whom are widows).

Israel’s generosity to the poor in their midst was a condition they had to meet if they expected to continue to receive God’s blessings (see **Deut 24:19**, “... so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands”). The “what” is clear: be generous to those in need. But we can’t ignore the “why.” Why did God expect Israel to be this generous to the poor and vulnerable in their midst?

God Expects us to Pay the Blessings Forward.

The answer is that God expects us to pay his blessings forward. God was over-the-top generous to Israel when he rescued them from slavery and brought them to the Promised Land, and he points Israel back to that act of grace as the reason why he expected them to extend grace to others:

“And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.” **-Deuteronomy 10:19**

“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.” **-Deuteronomy 24:22.**

Generosity is also characterized as a partnership with God, in which we act as human agents of his divine will to provide food and clothing to the poor and vulnerable in our midst. God defends their cause, God loves

the, God provides for them, and those who are well-off are the physical agents through which God accomplishes this.

Knowing this background helps us understand the absolute extravagance of Boaz’s generosity in the rest of chapter 2, because as we will see, his actions far surpass the bare minimum required of him in the Law.

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Reflection Question #3: In your own words, what did the Law of Moses require of affluent Israelites like Boaz, with respect to the poor and vulnerable like Ruth?

3. Boaz’s Extravagant Generosity (Ruth 2:4-16)

The Law required Boaz to allow Ruth to glean in his fields--essentially, to pick up the leftovers after his hired hands had harvested the prime portions of his crops. His actions in Ruth 2:4-16 show us that Boaz was going far above what was required.

When Ruth set out to glean in someone’s fields, she didn’t have anyone in particular in mind. She didn’t even know who Boaz was or that Naomi had a distant relative through her late husband. She only hoped to “find favor” (**Ruth 2:2**) in the eyes of someone who would be quick to honor the Israelite laws about generosity and gleaning.

In a stroke of luck (that we as readers can readily identify as God’s providential hand, working behind the scenes), Ruth comes to the fields of Boaz. And she most definitely finds favor in his eyes! But what does that mean, exactly? Let’s explore it further.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO RUTH • RUTH 2:1-16

Finding Favor

"Finding favor" in someone's eyes in the Old Testament's way of talking about grace. Grace is one of the key theological concepts in the Bible, and it's one of the five essential character traits of God (**Exodus 34:6**).

Grace in the Old Testament is always about a person in desperate need approaching a person in power and humbly asking them for help. If that person "found favor" in the the eyes of the person in power, their request would be granted. The term originated as a palace term (where lowly citizens approached the King, hoping they would view their plight with compassion), but it eventually came to describe any type of person approaching a someone in power for help with a hopeless situation.

Essentially, Ruth was hoping to find someone who would offer her grace in her time of need. She was hoping for at least the bare minimum, but much to her surprise, Boaz offered her more than she could ask or imagine, to borrow the words of the Apostle Paul.

Reflection Question #4: What does Ruth's desire to find grace teach us about our need for grace in our own lives?

Blessed Beyond All Measure

*"I was lost, now I'm found by the Father
I've been changed from a ruin to treasure
I've been given a hope and a future
I've been blessed beyond all measure."
-Rend Collective, Count Every Blessing.*

These words come from a powerful contemporary worship song about the extravagant blessings we've received through Christ. They could just as easily be the words sung by Ruth at the end of her first day gleaning in Boaz's fields (with perhaps a slight edit on the word "Father).

Let's recap all the ways Boaz went above and beyond what was required of him in his actions towards Ruth:

- Allowed Ruth to gather between the sheaves (i.e prime portions of the land, typically off limits for gleaners).
- Instructed his hired hands to not yell at her or abuse her.
- Allowed her to drink from the water collected by the men.
- Offered her a prayer for divine blessing.
- Spoke kindly, not harshly to her.
- Offered her bread, wine vinegar, and roasted grain.
- Instructed his workers to let Ruth have entire stalks of grain

Boaz's actions towards Ruth point us to the abundant grace we've all received from God, through Christ. We too have been blessed beyond all measure!



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO RUTH • RUTH 2:1-16

Boaz was an Answer to His Own Prayer

Why was Boaz being so generous to Ruth? He wanted to thank Ruth for her kindness to Naomi, which he has heard about through the grapevine. In **Ruth 2:12** he offers her this blessing:

"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."

The words "repay" and "richly" come from the Hebrew root word *Shalom* (i.e. peace, safety, completeness). The word for "repay" can mean to complete a work that has been begun earlier, to make something whole, to restore something that has been lost, make compensation for an injury, or reward someone for their exemplary behavior. All of these meanings would apply to Ruth's life.

A "rich" reward is one that is full, perfect, and finished. What we hear in Boaz's blessing is his recognition that he is able to repay Ruth in part for her kindness, but he knows that God alone has the power to repay her fully, the way that she deserves.

The remarkable thing about Boaz was that he was willing to be an answer to his own prayer. His words demonstrate that he had a genuine desire to see Ruth be blessed by God. His actions showed that he was willing to be the human vessel through which God poured out those blessings.

It's one thing to ask God to bless someone we care about, it's something different entirely to take it upon yourself to be that blessing. If Ruth models extraordinary faith and loyalty, Boaz models extraordinary generosity.

Reflection Question #5: How can we imitate Boaz's example of going above and beyond in our generosity?

4. Reading the Story as a Gospel Parable

Here's how this part of the story connects us to the Gospel story:

Ruth and Naomi represents all of us. We are tired, broken, and full of grief. We have endured famine and hardship that makes it nearly impossible for us to see any light at the end of the tunnel. We are fully at the mercy of people like Boaz, who has the resources and disposition to help us in our time of need.

Ruth models the right approach in our relationship with God. Instead of giving a lengthy monologue about why she has earned the right to harvest in the fields, she simply tells Naomi she will go out looking for grace (or favor). She knows grace is the one and only way she will survive.

Boaz represents the kindness, love, and generosity of God. Boaz goes far beyond what is required of him in the Law to provide for Ruth. The story keeps mentioning the fact that Ruth is a Moabite, and consequently unworthy of this kind of kindness, but Boaz shows her grace anyway. His generosity points us to the way God has been more gracious, more loving, and more generous to us than we could possibly imagine.

The story of Ruth is a Gospel story, and to properly understand it, we need to understand that we are Ruth, bowing down before Boaz in total amazement at the extravagant grace we've been given.

NOTES, QUESTIONS, ETC.
