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Boaz the Redeemer
Ruth 2:1-23

Tonight we've come to Ruth, chapter 2, and the third in our series of studies of the book. Before we begin to examine this next sage in the unfolding drama, would you bow your heads with me as we pray together?

“Lord, our God, we pray that You would help us now to understand and believe the message of Your Holy Word. Grant us a fresh filling of Your Spirit, that by His ministry we might see in the text Your glory more fully, ourselves more clearly, and Christ more truly, that we might bow before You with renewed wonder and awe, abhor ourselves in repentance and self despair, and cling to Jesus Christ alone as He is offered to us now in the gospel. These things we pray in Christ’s name,

Amen”

Ruth and Naomi have returned, you will remember, from the far country of Moab, to live in the town of Bethlehem, in Judah. When they arrived in town, they were the source of a great deal of gossip. All the women of the town were excitedly recounting the tale of how Naomi had married Elimelech and how they had taken their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, and crossed the border in search of the Moabite-dream. They left famine ravaged Judah in search of a better life for their family in Moab. And now they've come home, but all that is left of them are two bedraggled, dusty, exhausted, widows, and one of them, Ruth, was a pagan Moabite in the bargain! Naomi and Ruth were the talk of the town for a while. But chapter one ended, not with a note of scandal, but with an intimation of hope. They staggered into town just as the barley harvest was beginning.

Now in chapter 2 the curtain opens on a new scene. Ruth and Naomi have found lodgings in the town somewhere, but things are not looking good from their vantage point. They are two widows, one of them a member of Israel's ancestral enemies, the Moabites. In that society they were among the most disenfranchised and vulnerable. But for all that, as we will see, this chapter marks the turning point for Naomi and her daughter-in-law.

Look at the passage with me. There are three scenes. The first and the last take place in the safety of Naomi's home. Two conversations between Ruth and her mother-in-law bracket this whole chapter. In the first, in verses 1-3, Ruth and Naomi agree that Ruth should go out to the fields to glean whatever spare grain she could gather. In verses 18-23

Naomi and Ruth celebrate Ruth's extraordinary good fortune at the end of a long day. And sandwiched between these two conversations is the long central section in which Ruth is outside of the comfort and security of Naomi's home, gleaning with the workers out in the fields.

And in each of these three sections, we learn some important truths. Look with me, first of all, at verses 1-3. Here we learn about *the wise providence of God.*

The section opens with a focus on a stranger. The narrator is a master story teller, and he delays telling us about Ruth and Naomi and how they are faring, deliberately heightening the tension, making us wonder how things are going for them, with this seemingly unconnected, rather random statement in verse 1 about a man called Boaz. "There was a relative of Naomi's husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech. His name *was* Boaz."

But no sooner has the spotlight shone on Boaz than it turns to focus on the central characters in scene one: Naomi and Ruth. We are left scratching our heads a little about Boaz, aren't we? Until the drama begins to unfold, that is. Look at what happens. Ruth asks Naomi for permission, in verse 2, to go out into the fields to glean, and Naomi gives her permission.

Now the right to glean in the fields of Israel was guaranteed by the law of God. Deuteronomy 24:19-22 says, "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 stranger, 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 the boughs again; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean *it* afterward; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this thing."

Ruth had a legal right to glean in the fields. She specifically fitted the categories mentioned here, didn't she? She was stranger, fatherless, and a widow in that land. But we mustn't imagine that gleaning would have been easy for her. Despite her legal rights, her ethnic identity and the stigma of her widowhood made the prospect of gleaning intimidating and dangerous, to say the least. Neither should we think that finding enough

for Naomi and her to live on would be a straightforward thing. One commentator likens gleaning to trying to make a living from recycling aluminum cans. (Robert L. Hubbard, *Ruth, New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 138)

Yet despite the daunting prospect, Ruth demonstrates both remarkable bravery and servant-hearted love for her weary mother-in-law, and immediately heads out to look for a field in which to glean. And verse 3 explains that she does find a suitable spot and asks the foreman if she might glean quietly behind the workers in the field. And it is at this point that the comments about Boaz in verse 1 suddenly make sense.

Look at verse 3 please, “Then she left, 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 family of Elimelech.” Now that is a fairly wooden translation of the Hebrew here. The NIV, I think, says “as it turned out, she found herself working in the field of Boaz.” Literally, the Hebrew really says, with heavy irony, “the happenstance that happened to her was that the field belonged to Boaz.” As luck would have it! What do you know! Who’d’ve thunk it! The field she’s gleaning in? You’ll never guess...it was Boaz’s field. What a coincidence!

It just so happened that the field she chose at random belonged to the man who was her dead husband’s close relative. He was of the family, or more accurately, the clan of Elimelech. That meant, as we will see, that he had certain obligations regarding Elimelech’s property, possessions, and family. In His infinitely wise providence, God has so ordered it that Ruth the Moabitess would find herself gleaning in the one field where she was sure to be treated with kindness. He has so directed and governed her every step since leaving home that day that she came, seemingly by chance, infallibly to the field of Boaz, whose sense of duty and godly character ensure that she would not leave at the end of that day empty handed.

I was speaking to a good friend the other day, who is facing an uncertain future. As he explained his anxiety, the sense of being weighed down with worry about the unknown, it struck me that for many of us, myself included, the doctrine of the meticulous providence of God, governing “all His creatures and all their actions,” is far more readily confessed with our lips and assented to in our heads, than rested upon in our hearts.

How many times have we found ourselves on the other side of some uncertainty, some period of unknown outcomes, and been able to look back and see all the happenstances that just happened to us, all the lucky breaks that came out of nowhere, all the “who knew?” moments that the Lord wisely ordered so that His promises to us might not fail.

There is a smile playing across the face of the author of Ruth at this point, isn't there? He is winking at us as He says “as luck would have it, Ruth just happened to be gleaning in Boaz's field”, as if to say, well of course! When are you going to learn that God means what He says, that you really can trust Him, that He really is reliable and you really are safe in His hands? When will you begin to rest the whole weight of your life on the promise of Romans 8:28—that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose?

Well, Ruth begins to glean in Boaz's field. And in verse 4 the curtain opens on the second scene. Enter Boaz himself. If the first scene teaches us about the wise providence of God, the second scene teaches us about *the character of a man of God*.

Now as we've seen, names are important in the Bible and in the book of Ruth in particular. In this case, Boaz probably means something like, “strong man.” His name appears again, for example, as the name for one of the two mighty columns supporting Solomon's temple. And that is exactly the kind of man we find in Boaz. He is a pillar among the people of God.

Look at verse 4 please, “Now behold Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to his reapers, ‘The LORD be with you!’ And they answered him, ‘The LORD bless you!’” Now isn't that remarkable? These are tough working men with calluses on their hands, with tongues, you'd expect, to match. But not in Boaz's fields. Boaz, it would seem, wants his employees to know the Lord and is unembarrassed about pointing them to Him. And it looks like he has met with considerable success. His greeting to them, likely drawn from the Aaronic Blessing in Numbers 6, is for the Lord's presence with them, and their reply is for the Lord's blessing on him. His employees seem to hold him in high regard and respond to him with a spirituality to match his own.

And after he learns from his foreman about Ruth's identity in verses 6-7, he calls her over, and in verses 8-9, gives her the freedom to come and go among his workers and in his fields and drink their water and refresh herself. He has commanded the young men not to touch her, he says. You will be safe here, implying that she would not be elsewhere. When Ruth falls down and pours out her amazement and gratitude, he explains that he has heard all about Ruth. He doesn't throw her Moabite origins at her, notice, but he does explain that, verse 11, "'It has been fully reported to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, and *how* you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and have come to a people whom you did not know before.'

And he goes on to pronounce the Lord's blessing on her also. Look at verse 12, "'The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.'" I know you've been converted, Ruth, and I am praying for you that the LORD would bless you with all that you need.

And then, having prayed for the Lord's blessing on her in the form of adequate provision, he immediately lays plans to *become* the answer in her life to his own prayer for her. First he offers her a share in their evening meal, verse 14. Then he instructs his workers to leave extra sheaves behind them and to let her glean even among the standing grain. At the end of the working day, verse 17 tells us, she went home with an *ephah* of barley. She had four gallons of grain by the end of that day.

Now, what are we to make of Boaz? First of all, clearly, Boaz is not ashamed to talk about the Lord in front of his men. The life he lives and the words he says tally, they match up. Who he is in the work environment is who he is, period. It may be that you are embarrassed to talk about the Lord among your friends or co-workers because you know that there is a glaring disconnect between the life you live and the words you would say. And the result is that you say nothing and continue to live your compromised life. But that is the wrong choice. Boaz models the correct one, doesn't he? He speaks of the Lord easily, and openly, and often, and then lives in a way that backs up his words.

Secondly, Boaz is determined to be the answer to his own prayers for Ruth, even at his own expense. He gives her far more than she could hope to glean ordinarily. He goes out of his way, after praying for the Lord's blessing on her to be a blessing to her. When

Boaz says to her in verse 12, “The LORD repay your work and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel,” he is not pronouncing a casual “bless your heart.” He is not prepared to talk about the blessing of God without determining to be a blessing himself.

How easy in the culture of politeness and religiosity in which we live to season our conversation with empty but kindly sounding clichés! But what impact for the kingdom of God might we make on the lives of the lost and the needy if our words were matched by our deeds? If only our verbal blessing was coordinated with actually being a blessing!

So we learn about *the wise providence of God* and about *the character of a man of God*. And then finally in verses 18-23, the last scene unfolds. Here we learn about *the abundant grace of God*.

Look at the passage, please. There is a certain breathless, almost comic note, about this final scene, isn't there? Ruth comes staggering home, weighed down under the weight of her gleanings and her mother-in-law is stunned—Where did *you* glean today?

Naomi's words tumble out in a staccato of excitement and joy, “Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.” Well, if you'll just calm down a moment, mother-in-law, and let me get a word in, I'll tell you. And look at her report in verse 19. Our version captures it well. Ruth contrives to have the last word she says be the man's name. You can almost see her playing with her mother-in-law, slowly emphasizing each word: “The man's name...with whom I worked today...is.... *Boaz!*” And Naomi virtually sings her blessing in response, doesn't she? “Blessed be he of the LORD, who has not forsaken his kindness to the living and the dead!” And then, with what was doubtless a rather more sly tone in her voice, she adds, “The man is relative of ours, one of our near kinsmen.” She uses the word *go'el*. It means “kinsman redeemer.” Boaz stands in the legal position that requires him to step in and redeem his dead relatives' inheritance, including the provision of children to continue his family line. So when the rest of the story of what had happened and how Boaz had treated Ruth comes out, it is with a real gleam in her eye that Naomi finally concludes, “*It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, and that people do not meet you in any other field.*” Clearly there is a plot thickening in the mind of the mother-in-law. Naomi, as we'll see next time, has no qualms about playing match maker.

But we need to be careful, amidst the gentle humor of the story, not to miss the rich *theology*. This is about the abundant grace of God even more than it is the complex affairs of the heart. That comes out first in the blessing Naomi pronounces over Boaz in verse 20. She says “Blessed be he of the LORD who has not forsaken his kindness to the living and the dead!” We’ve run into the word she uses there for *kindness* there before, haven’t we? It is the word *hesed*, it means “faithfulness, unfailing love, the loyal commitment of the sovereign God to his covenant promises and people.” This is a story about *hesed*, about *grace*. But who is the source of that grace? The Hebrew, rather like the New King James here, is a bit ambiguous and can be read two ways. The one who has not forsaken his kindness to the living and the dead—is that the LORD or Boaz? It could go either way. And that I think is quite deliberate.

Boaz is intimately bound up in the blessing God wants to lavish on these two struggling women, and through them, in the fullness of time, on his whole covenant people. Boaz is the one in whom the covenant faithfulness of God will be poured out. Remember how Boaz himself pronounced blessing on Ruth back in verse 12, “The LORD repay your work,” he said. But then he went on to *be the source of that abundant blessing himself*. Boaz, the *go’el*, the redeemer, is the one in whom God would concentrate his blessing for this covenant family.

And we can even get a clue to something of the ultimate scope of that blessing. Notice that three times in the passage Ruth is called, “Ruth the Moabitess.” Verse 2, “So Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi...” Verse 6, “So the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered and said, ‘It is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab’” and verse 21, “Then Ruth the Moabitess said...”

At the beginning middle and end of this passage we find reminders that Ruth *does not belong*. She is a *Moabite*. She is *excluded*. Deuteronomy 23:3 says, “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation.” The law of God *excludes* her.

Yet, matching the three times Ruth’s Moabite descent is asserted are three reminders that Boaz is a relative of Elimelech (verse 1, verse 3, verse 20). Three times we are reminded that while she is excluded, there is one by whom she can be included. She needs Boaz to redeem her.

For each reminder that Ruth is shut out by God's law, there is a corresponding reminder that Boaz is her redeemer who can bring her deliverance. In Boaz, the kinsman redeemer, the blessing of abundant grace, as abundant as the overflowing grain Ruth struggled to carry home that day, was beginning to shower itself upon them. In Boaz, the redeemer, although the law of God shuts Ruth out, she would nevertheless find a way to belong to the people of God.

Friends, that is precisely our condition by nature, is it not? God's law excludes us. We are Moabites. We do not belong to the covenant people of God. God's law condemns and excludes us for our sin. But we have a *go'el*, a redeemer, he is Boaz's great, great, grandson. He is the Son of David, in whom the blessing of God is concentrated for all who believe. In Him we who were outcasts are now drawn near.

As Peter puts it in 1 Peter 2:10, "once we *were* not a people but now we are the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy." Or as Paul says it in Ephesians 2: 12-18, "at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

God loves to redeem outsiders and bring them in to the covenant people of God. He does it in Jesus Christ, to whom Boaz points us. He is tailored precisely to our needs.

Blessed, indeed, be the one who has taken notice of us, our kinsman redeemer, heir of Boaz, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.