

RUTH TWO

THE REDEEMER WHO GIVES BREAD

In chapter 1, we saw the story of a family who fled Bethlehem and the land of God's people to pursue provisions in Moab. Rather than take refuge in the Lord, they left for a quick fix, abandoning the people and place of God's promises and everlasting provision to come through His Son.¹ Though they lived in Bethlehem and were of the tribe of Judah from which God had promised a forever-King (Gen 49:8–10), they left. After a decade (or perhaps more) in Moab, Naomi has found physical bread, but she has not found the “abundant life” that comes to those who trust God will provide for His people through His promised Son (John 10:10). Her experience is “bitter” because her husband and two sons die, leaving her childless (1:6).

Ruth 1 demonstrates we need more than mere bread to have true life. As Jesus says, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” (Matt 4:4; cf Deut 8:3). We do not just need bread; we need bread on God's terms.

Even after Naomi hears of bread in Bethlehem, she has little reason

1. See Psalm 2:12.

to return other than that she is finally hungry for more than mere bread. She is turning to the Lord and His promises. If He can bring bread back to Bethlehem, perhaps He will overcome the bitterness of life she has encountered since abandoning Him.

In strictly human terms, Naomi has no reason to return. She has no husband to provide for her and no sons to continue the family name or secure her property rights. She does not even have a consistent and reliable source of daily bread.

Though faced with seemingly insurmountable odds, Naomi returns. Ruth, one of her widowed, Moabitess daughters-in-law (v. 2) follows her to Bethlehem, and this book ends up bearing her name. The other daughter-in-law, Orpah, does not follow Naomi, and she never again appears in God's story. Ruth is showing us that turning to the Lord and His people makes a forever-difference in whether you have a forever-place in God's story. Chapter 2 begins to show us how God brings His redemption to those who turn to Him.

When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, "it is the beginning of barley harvest" (1:22). The Lord gives bread to His people in Bethlehem, but how Naomi or Ruth will access the Lord's provision remains to be seen. Chapter 1 leaves us with the question of how Naomi and Ruth will survive and have a standing in the land without a husband or a son. How will the good news of bread in Bethlehem become good news for these two widows who have no reliable access to the bread God is providing?²

2. The answer, as we will see later in the story, is that secure access to God's provision will come through the miraculous birth of a son who rescues both Ruth and Naomi. One of the challenges of preaching Ruth is that really doing it justice requires multiple messages, but we need to understand each message in light of the story's conclusion. The birth of Obed to bring redemption to both Ruth and Naomi and ultimately to people

As we examine chapter 2, it is again helpful to view the story as unfolding something like the second act in a four-act play. Like chapter 1, it has three scenes. In scene 1, the narrator introduces us to Boaz, and Ruth happens upon his field (vv. 1–3). In scene 2, Ruth meets Boaz, and Boaz provides for her needs (vv. 4–17). In scene 3, Ruth returns to Naomi and shares grain with her from Boaz’s field (vv. 18–23).³ Let’s see what we can glean from this text.

Scene 1: Ruth happens upon Boaz’s field | We must recognize our need for God’s grace (vv. 1–3)

Verse 1 is packed with information about this man God uses to redeem both Ruth and Naomi. How that happens remains to be seen, but to understand chapter 2, we need to realize the Spirit is beginning to paint a picture through Boaz of God’s Promised Son—the ultimate redeemer who comes from Bethlehem. The language of verse 1 helps us arrive at this conclusion. The possibility of Boaz’s relationship to Naomi’s deceased husband is introduced, and more significantly at this point in the story, Boaz is described as “a man of great wealth” (v. 1). Some translations put it, “a worthy man.” Literally, he is “a man, a mighty one of wealth/power/character.”⁴ As Robert Holmstedt notes:

from all nations is critical for understanding that the author of Ruth is using the combination of Boaz and Obed to illustrate for us what God’s Promised Son will be like. The Promised Son is one who is miraculously born in Bethlehem in the line of Judah and of David, one who is a near enough relative (i.e. a human) to redeem us, one who has ample resources to provide for all who come to Him, and one who marries Himself to those He redeems.

3. In this division of the scenes, I differ slightly with Holmstedt (I am mostly following his divisions overall). In this case, I begin scene 3 in v. 17, but he begins it in v. 18.

4. Robert D. Holmstedt, *Ruth, A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, (Waco, TX: Baylor U Press, 2010), 105.

It is not clear which meaning of [*gibbôr*] is intended by the narrator. As the narrative unfolds, Boaz is characterized as all three: he is clearly a wealthy landowner; he has social power, and he is a man of great character. It is likely that the narrator intended all three and thus chose the polyvalent word to foreshadow what the audience will learn and to heighten the anticipation of a quick and happy outcome for No'omi.⁵

While all the senses of *gibbôr* (גִּבּוֹר) likely apply to Boaz, it is helpful to note that, *gibbôr* is used not only to describe people but also to describe the Lord. In Psalm 24, the Lord is described as *gibbôr* (v. 8 [x2]) in a passage which prophetically portrays the Son of God returning to heaven and entering the Father's heavenly presence after victoriously waging war against sin and death and being raised and exalted and given the Name above all other names (i.e. "Lord", Phil 2:9–11).

In Psalm 45, God is clearly King because His throne is forever (v. 6), and yet, the Psalm likewise portrays a man who is blessed by God forever (v. 2) as God's forever-King and the Lord. We have in Psalm 45 the promise of the incarnation of God's Son, the King of nations. As the psalm unfolds, the daughters of the nations are portrayed as those who, as Ruth has done in chapter 1, "forget [their] people and [their] father's house" (v. 10) and come to this King as "their Lord" (v. 11). This is significant because in Psalm 45:3, this Lord and King is called a *gibbôr*. The Lord and King who is blessed forever by God has a full share in what exclusively is God's. He has a full share in the wealth/power/character of the Lord. When Boaz is called a *gibbôr*, we are provided with a picture of God's ultimate *gibbôr*, the one of whom Isaiah says, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall

5. Holmstedt, 105.

be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty [*gibbôr*] God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

In the Hebrew text of Ruth 2:1, Boaz’s name comes at the end of the sentence. This builds our expectancy for encountering this man in the story. Who is this man? Will he rescue Naomi and Ruth? Will he be the son the Lord uses to get the bread of His provision to these women? Boaz is not merely a man of wealth, power, and character. He will be revealed as a relative on her deceased husband’s side of the family as the chapter unfolds. Could it be that simple? Naomi and Ruth turn to Bethlehem; it happens to be the beginning of barley harvest, and there is a wealthy, powerful, and noble man who meets God’s requirements for redeeming Naomi? In Leviticus 25:25, we learn that the right of redemption, of paying the price necessary to secure the land and standing of someone in Naomi’s position among God’s people, belonged to the “nearest relative.” Will Boaz be this man?

At this point in the story, we know about Boaz, but Naomi and Ruth do not. In verse 2, Ruth asks to glean, and Naomi agrees.⁶ As Ferguson reminds us, “God had made a law about gleaning.”⁷ In the Law of Moses, God established gleaning.

Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest...you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God (Lev 19:9–10; cf Lev 23:22, Deut 24:19).

6. Holmstedt, 108. Holmstedt notes, “The fact the (sic) No’omi’s response to Ruth is instructive suggests Ruth was in fact seeking her permission.”

7. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Faithful God: An Exposition of the Book of Ruth*, (Bryntirion, Bridgend CF31 4DX, Wales: Bryntirion Press, 2005), 51.

God commands landowners to leave the margins of their field to provide for the marginalized among them. Nevertheless, gleaning was difficult and unpredictable, depending on variables outside the control of the gleaner (i.e. the size of the margin of the field left unharvested and the number of gleaners in the field). The famine is over, but these destitute widows have no male support or claim to ancestral land and “are left to the mercy of landowners.”⁸

These women need someone who will give them bread, and they need someone who will give them legal standing among the people of God. They need a man who is related to Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, with the resources and the willingness to redeem them (“one of our redeemers,” v. 20).⁹ However, their immediate need is bread.

Ruth sets out in obedience to God’s laws of gleaning, but she does not do so presumptively. She is not looking for any random field with grain but for “one in whose sight I may find favor” (v. 2). Favor is the word for grace. Ruth is not seeking a god who helps those who helps themselves; she seeks the God who generously and lavishly rescues the hopeless. She needs someone who is qualified to give her help and willing to intervene in her desperate situation. She is, after all, a barren widow from Moab. While the law provided for a way for aliens to join God’s people (Num 15:14–16), Moab was among the least likely candidates. As Deuteronomy 23:3–4 says,

No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly
of the Lord; none of their descendants, even to the

8. Peter H. W. Lau and Gregory Goswell, *Unceasing Kindness: A Biblical Theology of Ruth*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 120.

9. Jesus does all these things. He nourishes His people spiritually. He substitutes Himself for them to cancel the debt of their sin and give them legal standing among God’s people (i.e. justification). He leaves heaven to be a human such that he is qualified to offer us redemption in His sacrificial death (i.e. by His blood).

tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.

Verse 2 marks the third of six times Ruth is identified as a Moabitess. In Ruth 1:4, her foreign status, along with that of Orpah, is noted. Then, Ruth is identified as being from Moab in 1:22, 2:2, 2:6, 2:21, 4:5, and 4:10.¹⁰ Ruth needs abundant grace to be joined to God's people, the sort of grace that can turn a Jacob into Israel. Ruth, like all of us, needs a way to change categories.¹¹

Ruth sets out to glean, fully aware of her need for the grace of God, and she just so “happened” to enter Boaz's field. As Ferguson notes on verse 3, “more literally translated, the words are something like this: ‘the happenstance that happened to her was...’”¹² When we rely on God, “happenstances happen” because God is sovereign even in the seeming coincidences of life, and He delights in rescuing those who need Him.¹³ As we read in Psalm 72:12, “For He will deliver the needy when he cries for help, The afflicted also, and him who has no helper.”

Ruth is new to Bethlehem and does not know what field she “happened” upon, but she is about to learn! In every story of God's rescue, note the happenstances. Note the unexpected connection, the chance meeting on an airplane, and a multitude of other things that “just happened.” Ruth is showing us that it is God who is “behind the scenes” in the everyday happenstances of life leading people to

10. Holmstedt, 106.

11. E.g. John 3:3, 7; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:1–10; Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:1–11.

12. Ferguson, 49.

13. Ferguson, 49.

His gracious provision for them in His Son.¹⁴

The reality is we are all like Naomi and Ruth. There is no one who does not need to be rescued and to receive life through the Son who supplies His gracious provision. As Lau and Goswell note:

We may or may not be enslaved to material poverty, but the New Testament makes it clear that we are all slaves to sin, which leads to death (e.g. Rom 5:12; 6:16–20, 23)...Just like Ruth and Naomi and the family line of Elimelech, we need someone to intervene to redeem us.¹⁵

That someone is Jesus. He is the greater Boaz.¹⁶ He is not just a man of great wealth and prominence but of infinite wealth and perfect character. Jesus is the one who has all the resources necessary to overcome your status as an outsider and welcome you to the family of God. The connections between Boaz and Jesus only grow as we read of Ruth's first meeting with Boaz in scene 2.

Scene 2: Meeting Boaz | We must behold God's redeemer and receive His bread (vv. 4–16)

Verse 4 opens with the words, “Now behold, Boaz” or “Look, Boaz!” The reader of the story finally meets the character verse 1 anticipates, and we are asked to behold him.¹⁷ In both his identity as a

14. Lau and Goswell, 105.

15. Lau and Goswell, 122.

16. For an excellent explanation of why it is right to view Boaz as a type of Christ, see Lau and Goswell, 136–139.

17. For the purposes of sermon writing or lesson development, as I was meditating on chapter 2, God brought the words, “Behold Boaz” prominently to my mind. Those words framed my approach to this scene in the story. In beholding Boaz, we can see our Savior and God's Promised Son as well. I hope this section will encourage you to see and worship Christ from the Old Testament.