

The great provider

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Date: 12 November 2017

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[0 : 00] So there, Ruth chapter 2, Naomi and Ruth have arrived safely in Bethlehem, they've circulated as they meet old neighbours, and now they come to face a hard reality, and the question is the same as it has been throughout the story so far, how are these women going to eat?

And so as we look at these verses, we see first the woman in need, and then we'll turn to Boaz as the man who provides, the woman in need, and the man who provides. And as we look at Ruth, as we see this woman in great need, we see again that she is a widow without obvious means of support.

She is an alien, she is a foreigner in a strange land, and where? A place where she knows a grand total of one person. And Naomi is hardly in a position to be much help and support, is she?

Five times in these 23 verses, we're reminded that Ruth is a woman away from home. Verse 2, Ruth the Moabite. Verse 6, she is the young Moabite woman who came back from Moab.

Verse 10, I am a foreigner. Verse 11, Boaz refers to how she left her father and mother and her native land, and came to a people she did not know. And verse 21 again, Ruth the Moabite.

[1 : 30] She is in a strange land. It is not going to be easy for her to survive. And she's under considerable emotional stress too, isn't she? She's lost her husband a little while ago.

She's said goodbye forever to everyone she had in the youth, certainly including parents, certainly including her sister-in-law, probably plenty of other close relatives as well. She has other emotional stress as she adapts to a new town and meets new people and learns new ways.

And surely other spiritual stress and strength as well. Whatever level of understanding she had before, her declaration back in chapter 1, verse 16, was surely a stepping up in her spiritual journey.

And here it is being tested already. Will she really be committed to what she said? Will she really make Naomi's people her people and die when Naomi dies?

Or is she going to think better of it and go running back home to a place of comparative ease and safety? And so in the midst of this difficulty, she is faced with this real, immediate and practical concern.

[2 : 38] How will she put food on the table for herself and her mother and all? They've presumably brought very little back with them from Moab. There's no indication of much of a break in the narrative here.

We're probably talking a day or a couple of days at most after they arrived in Bethlehem. And how will they put bread on the table for today and tomorrow? And really the only option available to her is to go out and glean it.

Not in itself an easy or an attractive proposition. When the harvest is brought in, the guy goes along, grabs a bunch of stalks in one hand and with the other, cuts them off with the sickle.

He gathers a few bunches together and he lays them down. And as he does so, perhaps a few ears are shaken loose from the stalks as he grabs them and they fall to the ground. Someone else comes along and gathers these small bundles together and piles them into sheaves.

And at this point, maybe they're just picking up one or two stalks. And so gleaning is going along. After that, gathering together, set and picking up the few ears that have fallen to the ground.

[3 : 41] And maybe, if you're lucky, a whole stalk or two. But don't forget that the man with the sickle and the woman gathering the produce together are paying attention to what they're doing.

They're being paid not to lose the crop along the way. And all this is taking place out under the hot sun in a Mediterranean climate. This is June in the Middle East.

It is pretty warm out there. And the gleaner has no right to go and use the shelter that's often put up at the side of the field. And they're going to need to make sure that they've brought a quantity of

water along with them.

Because again, they have no right to go and use the water that's provided for the water. So if they are going to work hard enough at gleaning to provide enough to feed themselves, never mind dependence as well, that is not going to be an easy thing to do.

This is hard physical labour with very limited reward. And secondly, this is dangerous work. It's clear, isn't it, from the trepidation with which Ruth goes.

[4 : 44] It's clear from the way Boaz speaks to her and to the labourers. And it's clear from the way Boaz speaks at the end that there is a very real possibility of her coming to harm and doing this. Certainly including verbal abuse and maybe being shoved away if the paid workers think that she's getting too close, that she's encroaching on that space.

So much is surely survivable. But it seems there's also a very real possibility of more serious harm. They seem afraid, don't they, of not just a bit of shoving around, but of more serious abuse of one form or another.

Whether a quiet corner of a field while everyone else is off-working on the other side. Or whether on a quiet lane on the way home, late at night, after a long day.

Never mind just a quiet corner of a field. This is the days of the judges. This is the days when everyone did what was right in their own eyes. This is the days when mob violence ruled and enemy armies came sweeping through.

Never mind the quiet corner of the field. There is a very real possibility of a long gag of people in the middle of the field doing their harm. The danger to Ruth is surely over-worsened by her status as a Florida.

[5 : 57] Subject to ethnic jealousy as well as the other inequalities of the human heart. So in many, many ways, bleeding is not an attractive prospect.

And yet it is the only option she has. She's not in a good situation. So she has this great need. But the woman with a great need also has a commendable attitude.

I don't know how you would have felt in that situation. There surely must have been a very strong temptation to despair. To collapse inward in bitterness. To become depressed or angry at her circumstances.

She isn't just throwing her lot in with Naomi's people and Naomi's God. And therefore assuming that other people will fix it for her no issue. Rather Ruth is herself willing to take the risks.

Is willing to do the back-breaking labour. Is willing to take the menial role. The degrading part in order to provide for her mother and her. You might imagine I guess that the two of them would go and glean together.

[7 : 02] Both for mutual protection and to gather more alongside one another. But for whatever reason Naomi doesn't go with her. Maybe she is despair.

Maybe she is so overtaken by her bitterness. That she cannot even muster the enthusiasm to care for her own needs. Wonderfully God provides for Naomi even so.

In the person of Ruth. And amazingly that is not Ruth's attitude. But rather she stoops in an attitude of service. And as we see more of her attitude as she goes out to glean.

We see that she is humble and not demanding. Submissive and not presumptuous. Now bear in mind God's law guarantees her the right to go and glean.

Naomi certainly knows this. I mean it would seem that Ruth knows this. Otherwise why does she suggest going? Yet despite knowing she has the right to do it. Nevertheless her intention is to go and see verse 2.

[8 : 01] Where she might find her. And indeed in verse 7. The foreman reports to her as that she came. And she said please let me glean. And gather her under the shoes after the readers.

Though she has the right to glean. She does not demand that right. But rather models that quality of devotion. That whilst seeking the opportunity available to her. Does not presume upon rights and privileges.

And so Ruth models for us a commendable attitude. In the face of a great need. The woman with her great need. And the man who provides.

Because here in chapter 2 we meet Boaz. The saviour comes along. Introduced to us here in verse 1. Introduced to us before Ruth has ever heard of him.

And whilst it seems like Naomi has forgotten that he exists. I mean surely if she remembered he was on the horizon. She would have been more hopeful. Or even turned to him directly.

[9 : 03] So introduced to us. Whilst in the background. And most to the characters of the story. And we meet this man who is described as a relative of Ellen Boeck. And as a worthy man.

Now originally the term behind that phrase worthy man. Is something more like a mighty man. Or a powerful man. In other words it's a term that's used of war heroes.

This is a military metaphor that's being used. Now by this point in the history of Israel. It has come to be used in a much more metaphorical sense. And that would seem to be the case here.

And so wealth or standing in the community. Is probably the main thing in mind. But again we are in the time of the judges here. There certainly was a need for men of military might.

And so we don't know about that possibility either. In any case. Whatever the source of his standing in the community. Is clearly about some significance. And that standing will be of importance later in the story.

[10 : 02] So our narrator introduces him to us very briefly. In this first verse. As a relative of some position in his hand. And then he leaves it.

Now at this point our antennas should be tickling shouldn't they? Because we know from passages like Leviticus 25. That families and clans have obligations to one another. That there are responsibilities.

That go with being part of the same plan. And we see that this is a worthy man. Who might therefore be able to make good on those kind of obligations. That Leviticus 25 and other passages set out.

And as the narrator here gives us the bare minimum introduction to this man. He rouses our curiosity. He flags a possibility. And then leaves us wondering what will happen.

As the suspense builds over the following verses. And the more we find out about this man. The more we discover about Boaz. The more we like him. Right?

[11 : 02] See how he treats his readers in verse 4. Behold Boaz came from Bethlehem. And said to the readers. The Lord be with you. And they answered. The Lord bless you. Now this could just be a common form of greeting.

That might even have been starting to lose some of its original significance of the words there.

Much as we agree with one another with having going. Not really expecting any kind of substantive answer.

Or much as we leave saying goodbye to one another. Without the slightest thought for the original origins of that phrase. As a contraction of God be with you. Certainly I only learned that because several commentators used it as an example.

And they had to go and look up what the original meaning of goodbye was. So maybe it has lost its original meaning as goodbye has. Maybe it is just a casual greeting.

But this is the only time such a greeting is recorded in the Bible. And a simple, shallow piece would have been a much more common greeting. So I think the narrator is important.

[12 : 06] That this is actually Boaz's attitude. That Boaz is deliberately inviting God's blessing on his workers. And they are him. He is presented to us as a godly man.

And then verse 5. Boaz notices Ruth. He wants to know who she is. I mean Bethlehem is a small enough place for an unfamiliar face to be remarkable.

And maybe he already has an inkling as to who she is. Certainly as soon as she is identified he knows all about her. He has heard her tell. Why does he ask about her in the first place?

Maybe given the direction the story takes later on. We are supposed to read it as a fledgling romantic interest. That he is spying her beauty across the field. And he wants to know more. It is a nice romantic story.

But perhaps not all that likely. That this man of high standing in the community looks at a woman in the lowest possible position. Bleeding in his fields. And thinks. Well maybe.

[13 : 06] She would be a nice wife. I think that is all that likely. I think that over-reads his interest. And frankly over-sexualizes his inquiry.

To my mind this isn't at this stage romantic interest. But simply caring concern. I think we are meant to see Boaz as the sort of man who would take note of anyone. Who he found unknown to him.

Gleaning in his fields. We see Boaz as a man who takes seriously his obligation to provide for the needy. And a man who I think would have made at least some of the provisions he makes for Ruth. For any needy woman. He found that. So his first notice. We perhaps shouldn't read that much into. But there is a second sense in which Boaz notices Ruth.

As we will consider in a moment. He makes abundant provision for her. And that prompts her to ask in verse 10. Why have I found favour in your eyes. That you should take notice of me.

[14:05] Since I am a foreigner. See his notice of her goes beyond seeing her from afar. Seeing her across the field. His notice of her goes to the point of providing for her needs.

And when Ruth asks why the answer he gives. Is that he knows what she has done. He knows what she has done for Leona. He knows how she has been willing to bring herself into this scary foreign land for her sake.

Boaz's kindness towards Ruth. Reciprocates her own kindness towards Leona. And in so doing he embodies the spirit of God's original law.

Twice in Leviticus the law that provides the gleaming is stated without any particular justification. But when it is stated in Deuteronomy 24. We find this. 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.

[15:07] 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 afterwards. 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. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt. Therefore I command you to do this. I command you to care for the sojourner. The foreigner who comes to dwell in your land. I command you to care for that person. Because you were a foreigner in a foreign land.

And Boaz remembers that. Boaz recognizes that they were foreigners in a foreign land. And so he makes provision for the foreigner in his area. And verse 12 recognizes that in some sense Ruth deserves recompense from God for her selfless attitude.

Deserves repayment for her service to lovers. And as Boaz invites that blessing of God on her. He himself provides that recompense.

[16:16] There's a deliberate parallel I think between verse 12 here. The God under whose wings he has taken refuge. And chapter 3 and verse 9. Where Ruth comes and asks Boaz to spread his wings over her.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves then. And to come back next week for more of that. So Boaz has noticed Ruth. And Boaz goes on to provide for Ruth.

And if you've noticed as we read through just how many different ways he makes provision for her. Verses 8 to 9. He provides for her safety. By encouraging her to stay in his field.

And close to the workers that he wants not to touch her. Verse 9. He provides water for her.

Remember as we said this is an incredibly hot climate. There is a good chance that the nearest drinking water is some walk away.

And so his instruction to go to the wells and to drink has enormous value. Because instead of taking half an hour to go and get a drink. She can keep gleaning.

[17:16] Without having to come and draw her own water. And without having to battle against thirst in the meantime. In a society where often the foreigners in the land were tasked with going and drawing water for the Israelites.

In that society Boaz instructs the Israelite man to draw water for the Moabite woman. Now those two things are enough.

The poor Ruth to wonder what she has done to earn his list. His favor verse 10. But Boaz isn't done there, is he? Verse 14. Come with me to eat. He invites her to come and sit with them.

He serves her food himself. And he gives her enough to eat that not only is she satisfied. Not only does she have leftovers. Indeed verse 18 says yes. She has enough leftovers to be worth giving to Naomi.

At the very least a piece of snack. If not a whole lunch worth of her own. She is abundantly provided for. And Boaz is still not done.

[18:13] Verse 15. She is to be permitted to glean even among the sheaves. Even in the area where the men are still at work. Even in the area where they haven't finished doing their gathering together.

Even in the place where the crops have been gathered into readily. Even then she is allowed to go and glean what she can. And he is still not done.

Verse 16. Not only do they let her into the best area. But they are to deliberately pull something out for her. Boaz deliberately sacrifices his own livelihood.

Sacrifices his own profits for her benefit. And this isn't just for today. This isn't just a one-off special offer. No, he tells her not to go anywhere else.

And verse 23 affirms. She sticks with him until the end of not only the barley harvest. But the wheat harvest as well. It is hard to imagine, isn't it?

[19 : 11] What more Boaz could possibly have done to provide for her. So it isn't surprising that when she comes to reckon up at the end of the day. She finds she has about an effort of barley.

You've maybe got a footnote in your Bible that tells you that that's about three-fifths of a bushel. Or about 22 litres. Maybe you know how big a bushel it is. I don't. And I can't say I've got that much of a ready picture of how much 22 litres is either.

Fortunately, I have a 22 litre box. This is 22 litres. This would be pretty heavy if it was full of grain sometime, wouldn't it? That would be a lot to be carrying home.

That is an abundant provision. And more than that, I have to put that more into perspective. The Babylonians a few years later, they're going to be paying their workers a ration of one to two litres per day.

So a two litre box. That's enough for a worker, and I guess his family as well, for a debt of their wages. And in one day, Ruth has gathered 11 times that much.

[20 : 20] Ruth has gathered nearly half a month's worth of wages in one afternoon of what should be the hardest, least rewarding work imaginable. Clearly, this is far beyond what she could have reasonably expected.

The workers have very obviously obeyed Boaz's instructions, and he has generously provided. He hasn't just obeyed the letter of the law. He's gone far beyond that.

And in fact, he's gone even beyond the spirit of the law into an enormous provision, into serious, gracious provision for her. And I suggest that as Boaz does this, this is the embodiment of the sort of attitude that the provisions for the masters and slaves in Colossians and Ephesians are expecting and commending.

This is the sort of attitude of generosity from one who has much. Boaz is a model of looking at what God has provided for him, looking at the abundant field that he has to come and reach from, and thinking, how can I serve God by serving others with this?

I suggest we might always be a little bit more like Boaz. However little and however much we have, that we might consider how we use that God-given provision for the good of others.

[21 : 41] Because Boaz could have done nothing more than give a grudging, go ahead to Ruth. And then caution his workers to be especially vigilant and make sure they worked hard to gather everything up.

That would have been within the letter of the law, at least. Would have been within his rights. You see, true disciples of God don't focus on their rights, do they?

But rather focus on the needs of others and the responsibilities that we have. So there we have it. We have the woman in need and we have the man who provides.

But there is a stealth third point. Let's reflect for a few moments on the God who provides. The God who sits in the background of all of us. This passage doesn't really say at any point God makes this provision.

Let's see, he's in the background. He rarely gets a particularly obvious role in this whole book. And yet, have a look for a moment at verse 3. So Ruth set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers.

[22 : 45] And she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who is of the clan of Elvac. She happened to. In fact, the sense of it is maybe even stronger than that.

As luck would have it, she chanced upon the field belonging to Boaz. But, why? Why luck? Why chance? This is hyperbole, isn't it?

This is the author making sure that we do not miss the fact that whilst it looks like chance, of course it is anything but. You picture him there writing these words with his tongue firmly stuck in his cheek.

Or the storyteller reading out this verse and putting the air quotes in. She happened to come to Boaz's field. They know and we know. Proverbs 16, 33.

The law is cast into the lab, but its every decision is from the Lord. To read from Boaz, maybe this looks like a chance meeting. But it is not saved from God's perspective.

[23 : 43] God is the God who directs the accidental. God is the God who controls the rammer. Who determines every single role of the dice. And the same is just as true for us today, isn't it?

From the big decisions down to the small coincidences. God is in control. What was it that made me choose to go to university in Manchester instead of Sheffield?

Sheffield University wanted higher grades. Presumably that suggests it's the better course, doesn't it? They have the cool professor of robot wars. Why did I not go when studying and interviewing in Sheffield? Can't think.

For that matter, why a few weeks into term did I agree to go to this crazy Scottish dance that I'd never heard of? I still couldn't pronounce what it was called by the end of the evening. Why did I do that?

What made Joanna choose her bright purple corduroy trousers that morning to put on that made very, very sure I noticed her? Why? We make these big decisions and we make these small decisions and these things just happen.

[24 : 44] And every single one of them is governed by God's providential care. There is not a good that. Ultimately there is only God decided that.

As I said earlier, God's a little bit in the background here, isn't he? And I think the reason why he's put into the background is that we're meant to see just how ordinary God's providential is.

By which I mean there isn't anything miraculous here, is there? There's no man out there coming down from heaven. There's no feeding 5,000 people with a few loaves. There's no turning stones into bread. Can God do all those things?

Of course he can. Does God normally do all those things? Yes, certainly not. Is he any less the provider when he uses the ordinariness than when he uses the miraculous?

No, he is not. So God makes ordinary provision for this woman in need two ways. Firstly, God's laws make provision. Back in the days of Moses, God commanded the laws that are written in Leviticus and Deuteronomy that provide leading rights to widows and to foreigners.

[25 : 54] Ruth is doubly qualified, isn't she? Furthermore, whilst there are a number of other references in the Bible to gleaning, they're all, as far as I can make out, either metaphorical or theoretical, that this is something that could happen, or a metaphor for kind of gathering the last remnants.

The only reference I can find to an actual person actually going and gleaning is Ruth. God provided a few hundred years earlier the exact law that Ruth and Naomi would need to get them through these days.

And secondly, well, does it through an ordinary man doing ordinary things? Well, maybe he does extraordinary things, but certainly not miraculous things, at least.

And thus, Ruth, as that general hope of returning at the beginning of the barley harvest comes to fruition, is fleshed out abundantly for how God provides for these people.

Now, maybe by now you can say it with me, though. That's not embarrassing one another. Ruth is the story of God's providential provision for ordinary people in ordinary life provided by ordinary people.

[27 : 07] Ruth is the story of God's providential provision for ordinary people in an ordinary place, in ordinary life provided by ordinary people.

Let's pray. Lord God, thank you. You provided for a woman in great need.

In dire circumstances, you have abundantly provided more than she could have asked or imagined. Thank you that you use a good and godly man today.

That you make your everyday provision for your people. Lord, we're sorry that so often we let it pass by without notice that you provide for us. And Lord, we thank you for it, too.

Amen. Amen. Amen. We'll finish with Psalm 94. Let praise his God for his protection and his privilege.

[28 : 08] Surely the saints you have...