

# Feeding a family: God's Providence

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[0:00] Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the response of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight.

! O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.! We read of Ruth in the second chapter, and she went and gleaned in the field behind the reapers.

It's often said that our first impression of someone is the right one. When I hear that said myself, I think of a story told by the late Sir John Burnett, who was principal of Edinburgh University in the 1980s.

When Burnett was interviewed for that top university position, he was asked how he would recognize someone who was a natural leader. In reply, he told a fascinating story.

During the Second World War, he had served as a Royal Marine Commando. He was sent into enemy-occupied Yugoslavia, as it was then, to meet up with the leader of the partisans resisting the occupying German army.

[1:23] He was brought into a cave up in the mountains. As he sat there in a circle of partisan fighters, no one introduced themselves as the leader.

But as the partisans talked with him, Burnett noticed one man sitting in the corner of the cave, saying nothing but listening intently.

The other partisan fighters would look in his direction from time to time, noting his reactions to their conversation. Burnett said he knew instinctively that his first impression was right.

This was their leader. He needed no introduction. Silently, Tito radiated the authority of a natural leader.

The first impression is often the right one. What's your first impression of Ruth in our story? Is Ruth a compassionate figure, caring for her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi?

[2:30] Is she a romantic figure, boldly wooing Boaz into marrying her, as we'll see in chapter 3? Or is Ruth a vulnerable figure, caught up in a life-and-death struggle, showing extraordinary courage and resilience in the face of terrifying threats to her survival?

What do you think? What are your first impressions of Ruth in our story? Last Sunday, we had a fine introduction to the Old Testament book of Ruth from Gordon.

In chapter 1, we heard about a family driven by famine from their homeland in Israel into a foreign land, the land of Moab. We learned of a tragedy in that family's life in exile, with the death of all their menfolk, a husband and two sons.

We saw the plight of a widow called Naomi. She is left to fend for herself with only her two local Moabite daughters-in-law for support.

We heard about Naomi's decision to return to her native land where the famine had ended and the harvest had returned. And we were moved by that closing scene with these three women in their grief-struck family.

[4:05] Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to stay in their own land while she returns. And one of them, Orpah, agrees to do so. But we heard that the other daughter-in-law, Ruth, promises to stay with Naomi as she returns home, saying memorably, where you go, I will go.

But did you notice, even more remarkably, Ruth, the Moabite woman, Ruth, the foreigner, Ruth, the immigrant, says to Naomi, the worshiper of the God of Israel, your God shall be my God.

As Gordon noted last week, Ruth's words echo God's promise in Exodus to those Hebrew slaves in Egypt. I will take you as my people and I will be your God.

This is the God Ruth commits her life to, the God of Israel who sets the oppressed free. We could not find a better first impression of Ruth than in Gordon's sermon last Sunday.

But in a sense, all of our services over the past three Sundays in October have given us an accurate first impression of Ruth's world and Ruth's story and Ruth's God.

[5:36] Think back. In our Harvest Thanksgiving service, we learned from our eco-congregation group about the reality of famine today, especially the terrible cost of drought and the lack of safe drinking water for millions of our neighbors around the world.

We learned that the world of Ruth is not some far-off Sunday school story of long, long ago. The world portrayed in the book of Ruth is the real world.

Millions of our fellow human beings are living in today as climate refugees, a world of drought where the rains don't fall and the harvests fail.

And we learned that it is a world where widows wonder if God has abandoned them, crying out like Naomi, the Lord has dealt bitterly with me.

But in the following Sunday's Guild dedication service, we heard one response to Naomi's cry of desolation at her situation. The Guild challenged us to look beyond the walls of the church to that world in need.

[6:53] Like Ruth, we were challenged to go where the Guild goes, to go where God goes, to make a practical difference in the lives of those for whom life has dealt a bitter blow.

These are our first impressions of the book of Ruth. It's an inspiring story of human loyalty in the real world of famine and drought, gripped by fear and the struggle to survive.

It is a moving story of human grief, a family overwhelmed by bitter loss, crying out to God, where are you in all of this? And so with these first impressions, we can now go deeper into Ruth's story in chapter two.

At the start of this chapter, Naomi and Ruth have returned from the land of Moab to Bethlehem.

This is the hometown of Naomi's late husband, Elimelech.

And in that town of Bethlehem, there's a kinsman on her husband's side of the family, a worthy man called Boaz. We learn that Boaz is a man of wealth, a prominent member of the local community.

[8:16] What a contrast with Naomi and Ruth. They have come back to Bethlehem in dire straits.

In a land where the harvest has returned, they are still at risk without the means to buy the food that is now bountiful.

for others. And in a patriarchal society where women are hot and doon, as we say in Scotland, and men lord it over them, Naomi and Ruth are vulnerable without the husbands or sons who can provide for them or defend them against predatory males.

We know that this is their situation because as soon as the wealthy Boaz has been introduced in the story, Ruth the Moabite, the foreigner, the immigrant, highlights their poverty.

How? Ruth says to Naomi, let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I might find favour.

Gleaning is what poor people have to do to survive in an agrarian economy. On the screen you see a picture of what gleaning would have meant for Ruth.

[9:32] This is a famous etching by the French artist Jean-Francois Millet. It shows women gleaning in a harvest field.

They are following behind the reapers bringing in the harvest. You see these women are doing backbending work. They are gathering all stalks and ears of wheat they can find that the reapers have left behind.

Just enough to grind a little flour to make some bread and stave off their hunger for one more day.

When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray give us this day our daily bread he surely has in mind people like these gleaners for whom having enough bread to eat was a daily struggle.

But fortunately for Ruth she has converted from her Moabite gods to the God of Israel. Why is she fortunate because this God of Israel had commanded those he had set free from slavery in Egypt to let the poor and the foreigner among them have the right to glean what grain they can from their harvested fields.

And so in the book of Leviticus the Lord speaks to Moses and says when you reap the harvest of your land you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.

[11:02] You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the alien the foreigner the immigrant.

I am the Lord your God. God puts his name on the line for them to obey this commandment. You see the drama here.

Ruth is now in a land of plenty but she is poor and an alien. Her only hope is in the God of Israel who has commanded that those like her had a right to glean along the field edges and behind the reapers.

But she knows it is dangerous as well as hard work. As a woman on her own she is at risk of harassment or worse. She will only be safe if she can work behind reapers who will look kindly on her and offer her some protection.

Enter Boaz into the story. We learn that it so happens that Ruth has chosen to glean what grain she can from the part of the harvest field owned by Boaz.

[12:21] Now at this point in the story Ruth knows nothing of Boaz not even that he is a kinsman of her late father-in-law. Naomi has told her nothing of this wealthy relative.

And Boaz in turn knows nothing of who this young woman might be who is gleaning in his field far less that she is the daughter-in-law of his kinsman Elimelech.

And so their first encounter is as strangers to one another. So let's ask again what are their first impressions of one another.

First Boaz asks his lead worker in the harvest who this young man this young woman might be. Boaz is told that she's a Moabite woman, a foreigner who returned from Moab with Naomi.

Boaz is told that Ruth asked to be allowed to glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers exactly as in Millie's drawing. And then the head reaper says something very significant.

[13:33] if we're to understand Boaz's first impression of Ruth. He tells Boaz so she came and she's been on our feet from early this morning until now without resting hardly for a moment.

In other words, Boaz's first impression of Ruth is of a poor foreigner who is an exceptionally hard and conscientious worker. We all know a Ruth.

If you've ever visited a care home in this city, we couldn't have care homes without these foreign women who come and give their service with such conscientious care.

That's Ruth. And what of Ruth's first impression of Boaz? Boaz is clearly impressed by her dedication to the back-breaking work of gleaning in his harvest field without a break from early morning to the heat of the day.

And so he says to Ruth addressing her with courtesy given the very different status they have in society. He is what we call in Scotland a high hedgen in the community and she's a woman on the margins.

[14:50] But he says to her, now listen my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young woman.

keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped and follow behind them. I've ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.

Ruth's first impressions of Boaz is of a caring and honourable man who is concerned for her welfare. Drink if you are thirsty and concerned for her safety.

The young men will not bother you. So she is overwhelmed by this unexpected kindness, but she throws herself at his feet in a traditional eastern ritual act of respect.

She asks Boaz in astonishment why he is showing such favour to her, a poor foreign woman. In reply, Boaz reveals that he knows more about Ruth than that she is a hard worker.

[15:56] Boaz has learned her whole story from his head reaper. All that she has done for her mother-in-law Naomi since the death of her own husband, leaving her own family to come to an unknown people and an unknown land.

Boaz knew how vulnerable this woman was in her loyalty to Naomi. And so Boaz asked for God's blessing on this foreign worker.

Ruth has indeed found that refuge in Boaz's care for her.

She says for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servants, even though I am not one of your servants. Boaz goes on to share a midday meal with her.

He instructs his workers to give her extra handfuls of barley to bring home to Naomi. In this encounter between Boaz and Ruth, we see their first impressions are right.

[17:08] They are both worthy people and worthy of one another. Ruth works hard in Boaz's field to provide for Naomi and Boaz acts honorably towards her, ensuring that she has enough gleaned barley to eat and his protection from the young males who might harass her.

But we have a very different stories of first impressions when Ruth gets home to Naomi. Naomi. Now it is a story of how utterly wrong first impressions can be.

When Naomi asks Ruth in whose field she has worked all day, Naomi learns that it was behind Boaz's reapers that Ruth had been gleaning in the field of Naomi's relative and closest kin.

On realizing the identity of Ruth's benefactor, Naomi cries out, may he be blessed by the Lord whose kindness has not forgotten the living or the dead.

But wait a moment. Do you see the dramatic change from the first impression of God that we gain from Naomi at the start of this story in chapter one?

[18 : 29] On her return to Bethlehem, she slowly recognized by those who knew her before, she fled to Moab with her husband and two sons. Is this Naomi? They asked. Do you remember Naomi's reply to our old neighbors in Bethlehem?

Call me no longer Naomi. Call me Mara, which means bitter. For the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.

I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call Naomi Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me.

This is the terrible first impression we gain of Naomi's God. She fled her homeland with her husband and sons to escape a life-threatening famine.

She has returned home alone. Naomi says she will change her name from Naomi to Mara meaning bitter. She felt that the Lord had dealt bitterly with her and understandably so, given the death of her husband and two sons.

[19 : 42] This is the first impression we gain of Naomi's God. But now Naomi is praising this same God, whose kindness has not forgotten her, the living, or the memory of her family, the dead.

For Naomi, it turns out her first impression of God was not the right one. As the story of Ruth unfolds, it was this last impression that proves the right one.

The God that Naomi thought had dealt bitterly with her and abandoned her was now showing her kindness through her kinsman Boaz and his kindness to her daughter-in-law Ruth.

It turns out that it is last impressions that matter with the God of Israel, who is for us as Christians the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Think of how true that was for Jesus himself. People's first impressions of Jesus were often so negative. When Philip tried to introduce Nathaniel to Jesus, Nathaniel replied, can anything good come from Nazareth?

[20 : 59] When Jesus preached the good news in his hometown synagogue, people said, is this not Joseph's son? And threatened to throw him over a cliff. And when Jesus was brought before Pilate, his disciples disowned him and the crowd shouted for his execution.

And even on the cross, Jesus himself cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And yet it's the last impression of God that counts in the story of Jesus as in the story of Ruth.

As the apostle Peter declared to the crowds in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, you that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say. Jesus of Nazareth, you crucify.

But God raised him up, having freed him from death. Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.

Too often in our lives, our first impressions of God are wrong. Understandable, but wrong. God like Naomi, we can go through great suffering and think that God has abandoned us.

[22 : 23] We can look at the great suffering of the world around us and doubt there is a loving God. These first impressions of God are understandable and should be taken seriously and never dismissed out of hand.

Who has not thought them at some point in our lives? I know I have. But what we learn from the story of Ruth and Boaz and Naomi is that it is last impressions that more often help us to know God truly and understand God's ways in the world.

Now, faith in this God, Ruth's God, we need like Naomi to wait for the end of the story. Not our first impressions, but our last and lasting impressions of God's ways in our world.

To have faith in this God, Ruth's God, means to wait for the end of the story, to wait for our last and lasting impression of God, not our first.

For Jesus' story did not end with his suffering on the cross. it began anew on Easter morning and so does ours.

[23:46] Thanks be to God. Amen. Let us pray. O merciful God and heavenly Father, the God of Ruth and Naomi, be with all those women and girls, these young people, the poor of the world, who are on the road because of famine.

Protect them from harassment and work with all agencies who work to protect them. And help us, like Ruth and Naomi, look not to the beginning of the story, but to the end, where all will be well and all will be well.

Through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.