

From famine to harvest

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Date: 30 September 2018

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[0 : 00] Now, Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favour.

And she said to her, Go, my daughter. So she set out 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 clan of Elimelech.

And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, The Lord be with you. And they answered, The Lord bless you. Then Boaz said to his young man, who was in charge of the reapers, Whose young woman is this?

And the servant, who was in charge of the reapers, answered, She is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab.

She said, Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers. So she came and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest.

[1 : 11] Then Boaz said to Ruth, Now listen, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women.

Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn.

Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, Why have I found favor in your eyes that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?

But Boaz answered her, All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.

The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

[2 : 15] Then she said, I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, for you have comforted me and spoke kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants. And at mealtime, Boaz said to her, Come here and eat some bread, and dip your morsel in the wine, and do not rebuke her.

And she said, I have found a lot of bread, and I have found a lot of bread, and it was about an ephah of barley. And she took it up and went into the city.

Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied. And her mother-in-law said to her, What did you glean today, and where have you worked?

Blessed be the man who took notice of you. So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, The man's name with whom I work today is Boaz.

And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead. Naomi also said to her, The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers.

[3 : 58] And Ruth the Moabite said, Besides, he said to me, You shall keep close to my young men until they have finished all my harvest.

And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted. So she kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests.

And she lived with her mother-in-law. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, The city that kills the prophets and stone those who are sent to it.

How often would I have gathered your children together, As a hen gathers her brood under her wings? And you would not.

See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, You will not see me again Until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

[5 : 09] My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me. I cannot choose the colours, He worketh steadily.

Of times he weaveth sorrow, And I in foolish pride forget he sees the upper, But I the underside. Not till the loom is silent, And the shuttles cease to fly, Shall God unroll the canvas, And explain the reason why.

The dark threads are as needed, In the weaver's skilful hand, As threads of gold and silver, In the pattern life has planned.

I wonder if that poem rings true of your life. It certainly does of mine. I can think back to events in my life That at the time made little sense to me.

I simply couldn't see how God was at work for my good. And yet with the benefit of hindsight, I now look back with gratitude for those times, And know that good came from them.

[6 : 13] The dark threads are as needed, In the weaver's skilful hand, As threads of gold and silver, In the pattern life has planned. Of course that doesn't necessarily make hard times any less painful, Nor will we always be able to make sense, Of everything we experience, This side of the new creation.

But the God of the Bible, Is a God who's shown through history, That whether big or small, He ordains all things for good. And that is a great comfort.

And we see this wonderful truth demonstrated In the experience of God's people, And in particular one family, In this little book of Ruth, Which we're studying over these four weeks. Last week we met a man called Elimelech, An Israelite who sinfully fled to Moab, Rather than turning to God, When famine struck.

And if you were with us, You'll remember things quickly turned from bad to worse, For his family. Elimelech's two sons married foreigners, Compromising with the pagan world around them.

And within a decade, Both father and sons had died. You may find it helpful to listen online to the sermon, If you weren't here last week. But we left the story with two widows, Naomi, Elimelech's wife, And Ruth, Her Moabite daughter-in-law, On their way to Bethlehem.

[7 : 40] With neither husbands nor sons, Their prospects looked bleak. And yet we saw remarkable faith being expressed by Ruth, This foreign widow.

In contrast to Elimelech's self-reliance, And Naomi's self-pity in the face of trouble, Ruth exercised an extraordinary self-surrender to the God of Israel, Promising to stick with Naomi and her God for the rest of her life.

There's no doubt these women must have feared for their futures. Humanly speaking, Things looked grim. And yet, As we're about to see, God was weaving the tapestry of their lives, Even amidst the hardships, In ways they never could have expected.

And not just their lives, Because as we began to see last week, Ruth is about far more than simply how God works for good, In the lives of his people as individuals.

Remember, The very first verse of the book tells us that it's set in the days of the judges. Days in which the final verse of the book of Judges tells us there were two problems. The people were evil, And there was no king to lead the nation.

[8 : 54] And as we'll see over the next two weeks, Ruth shows us God's solution to both those problems. How he redeems or rescues a sinful people. And how he was paving the way for a king.

And he achieves both through this one unlikely family, Through whom God was weaving a vast tapestry That would have implications for the whole of human history.

Last week we looked at the human characters of chapter one. But of course the main character of the book of Ruth is God himself. And in chapter three we learn three wonderful things about him.

That we can cling to whatever life throws at us. And which give us confidence that he is working out his great purposes for his world. And we're going to think about each in turn.

So first of all, Ruth chapter two assures us of God's providence. God's providence. When disappointments or hardships come, It's easy to doubt God's in control.

[9 : 58] Or that he's exercising that control in the best way possible. But Ruth teaches us that although God's sovereign control may not work as we expect, It always has his people's best

interests at heart.

We can trust his providence. Which is just another word for the way he ordains events for the good of his people. That's actually a great theme of the book of Ruth as a whole.

For example, do you remember we saw him at work visiting his people to give them food in verse six of chapter one. And it's particularly evident in our chapter this morning. You see, the faith Ruth demonstrated in chapter one was well grounded.

Because chapter two shows God pulling the strings at every turn. Ruth and Naomi aren't allowed to see God's hand at work until the end of chapter two.

But the author wants us, the reader, to see things from God's perspective from the very first verse. Look down with me at verse one again. We're told, now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.

[11:13] Now if we probably understood Naomi and Ruth's predicament, this verse should fill us with hope. Because being introduced into the narrative at this point is exactly the man we're looking for.

He's from the clan of Elimelech. And just to make sure we don't overlook this, the author repeats it for emphasis at the end of verse three. Ruth was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech.

Now this is where it's important that we have some kind of understanding of the workings of Old Testament law. Naomi's situation was particularly desperate. Being a widow without sons was perilous in the culture of the day because it was the men who provided for their families.

And not only had Naomi's husband and sons died, but she had no chance at her age of having new sons to marry Ruth and Orpah in order to continue the family lines as Old Testament law prescribed.

And it seemed unthinkable that Ruth would be able to find a husband from the wider family who'd be willing to support Naomi and take on or redeem the family line of Elimelech.

[12:27] That's why Naomi had encouraged Ruth to return to Moab. That's why Ruth was demonstrating such self-sacrificial faith in staying with Naomi.

But here in verse one of chapter two, against all odds, a glimmer of hope appears. Before anything happens, the author tells us about a man who was from Elimelech's clan.

Maybe, just maybe, this man will be the answer to all Naomi's problems, we think. So the writer teases us with the mention of Boaz.

And then he takes us back to the story in verse two. Naomi and Ruth are chatting over the breakfast table. And the mood's rather somber as they stare at empty cereal boxes and the few crumbs of bread they've got left.

So in desperation, Ruth takes matters into her own hands. She says to her mother-in-law in verse two, Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favour.

[13:33] Well, there's nothing to lose, so Naomi agrees. Ruth heads off to the field to see if anyone will take pity on her. Look at the end of verse three. We're told, She happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech.

Ruth just happened to stumble across Boaz's field. Fancy that. Of course, this means nothing to Ruth at the time. But as the reader, having had Boaz's identity revealed to us, we know this can't be mere coincidence.

In his providence, God has brought Ruth to Boaz's field. He's in control. In fact, again, as it so happened, verse four.

Behold, Boaz himself came from Bethlehem. At that very moment, Boaz rocks up. God is once again pulling the strings. Boaz greets his workmen.

And then he notices an unfamiliar woman in his fields. Whose young woman is this, he asks. She is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab, he's told.

[14:54] While the story unfolds, Ruth has a pretty remarkable day. And when she returns home, she learns the true significance of whose field she's worked in.

Look on with me to verse 19. Naomi asked Ruth, Where did you glean today, and where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you. So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, The man's name with whom I work today is Boaz.

And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead. Naomi also said to her, The man is a close relative of ours. One of our redeemers. Now we'll see the full implications of all this next week, when we'll think about that term, Redeemer, sometimes translated, Kinsman Redeemer.

But for now, notice how Naomi's attitude to God suddenly changes, as she perceives his hand at work, in what's happened. She too senses the Lord's hand in Ruth's encounter with Boaz.

[16:06] Remember how at the end of chapter 1, Naomi had complained, The Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me. She never doubted God's control, but she doubted his kindness to her, and became bitter.

But as she recognises that God has led her daughter-in-law into Boaz's fields, Naomi comes to see that her earlier attitude was utterly faithless.

It's a remarkable turnaround in her thinking, isn't it? Notice how she says in verse 20, The Lord's kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead. She comes to realise that even in her earlier misfortune, God hadn't abandoned her or her dead husband's family, but was providentially using events in his kindness to bring her back to the promised land, to a place of abundance, and to a man of a limelight's own clan.

Without her earlier hardships, Naomi would never have received this great blessing. God had been present, despite appearances, even in her darkest moments.

He hadn't forsaken her after all. She could see God's providence. Of course, it's easy to be wise after the event, isn't it?

[17:33] When we see God's hand at work in the past, it's easy to praise him for it. What's much harder is to trust him in the midst of trials? When we can't see how God is in control?

When our life is falling apart, or it looks like God has forgotten his people in a society where Christianity seems to be on the back foot? But that was the sort of faith Ruth expressed.

She trusted on the basis of comparatively little evidence. And we have so many more reasons to trust. The Bible gives us example after example of God ordering events for the good of his people. So even when we're experiencing one of the dark threads of God's plan, let's trust his providence is at work for our good and the good of his people. And if our life has perhaps recently taken a turn we never expect it, or can't understand at the moment, we don't need to grow bitter or to blame God. We need to worry God's forgotten us or made a mistake. We can trust his providence in all things. So that's the first truth about God we see in this passage.

[18:55] His providence. But secondly, we also learn of God's provision. His provision. Did you notice the extent of Boaz's provision to Ruth in these verses?

Just notice how he goes out of his way to meet her needs. Have a look at verse 8. Then Boaz said to Ruth, Now listen, my daughter.

Do not go to glean in another field or leave this one. But keep close to my young women. Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping and go after them.

Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn. Boaz is a man of integrity and he's very generous.

He provides for Ruth, allowing her to glean in his field. He protects Ruth, ordering his men not to take advantage of her as they easily could have done since she had so few rights.

[19:58] And he permits her to drink water from the jars his men have filled whenever she wants. But that isn't all. Look on to verse 15.

Boaz gave orders to his men. Let her glean even among the sheaves and do not reproach her and also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean and do not rebuke her. So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned and it was about an ephah of barley. Now it's important to realise that Boaz's generosity here goes way beyond that required by the law.

The law required his men to leave any stalks they missed for the likes of Ruth to pick up. But here, Boaz explicitly orders them to pull out some extra stalks for her and leave them in her path.

It's an abundant, generous provision. And the result is that Ruth returns to Naomi that evening with a whole ephah of barley, equivalent to 20 kilos.

[21:10] Famine has turned to plenty. Now as we'll see during the next couple of weeks, Boaz is actually a picture for us of another man who was from Bethlehem.

A man who was in fact one of Boaz's descendants in the kingly line of David. A picture of Jesus himself. Charles Spurgeon, the Baptist preacher, even described Jesus as our glorious Boaz. So Boaz is an Old Testament picture or foreshadowing of God's generous provision to us through Jesus, his greater descendant. Just as Boaz provided abundantly for Ruth and Naomi in this chapter, so too God provides for us through Jesus in a way that far exceeds what we deserve. Now of course this doesn't mean that God will always provide for us in the abundant material ways he provided for Naomi and Ruth. His material provision to them here is a picture of his spiritual provision to us.

Remember the famine that afflicted God's people at the beginning of the book was a sign that they were under his curse because they'd rebelled against him.

[22 : 33] And the Bible teaches that we too are by nature under a curse. The curse of God's judgment against human sin. And just as Boaz provides materially both for Naomi the Israelite and her Gentile daughter-in-law, as we'll see over the next couple of weeks, Jesus meets the spiritual needs of all those who rely on him.

Indeed, the language of verse 14, which tells us that Ruth ate until she was satisfied and she had some left over, is the exact language used of Jesus feeding the 5,000 in the Gospels, which seem to be a deliberate echo.

Through his death, which we'll be remembering when we celebrate the Lord's Supper later, Jesus, our bread of life, provides us with spiritual food, saving us not merely from hunger, but from hell. He provides not just the physical bread and wine that Boaz offers Ruth in verse 14, but the spiritual food we depend on. So the lesson for us here is to trust God's provision for our Christian lives. When Naomi and Elimelech ran to Moab for provision, the result was death. But when Naomi and Ruth returned to the land of God's presence, they received abundantly.

[24 : 04] And we do well to learn from their example to turn to Jesus for salvation and depend upon him rather than relying on our own efforts.

I don't know what spiritual needs we may have at the moment. Maybe it's perseverance amidst a great trial, or the courage to do what's right in a difficult situation, or the boldness to speak to someone about Jesus, or the strength to keep battling sin.

Well, whatever it is, let's not run to Moab. Let's not try and fix things in our own strength, or worry that God can't give us the strength that we need. Let's trust instead that God is able to provide abundantly.

So, Ruth chapter 2 assures us of God's provision as well as his providence. But maybe we worry that we just don't deserve it, that we're not good enough to find his favour.

Well, then listen up to the third thing that these verses remind us of. God's providence, God's provision, and finally, and more briefly, God's grace.

[25 : 20] God's grace. Because notice why it is that Ruth receives Boaz's blessing. It's not because there's something about her which means that she deserves it.

After all, she has no natural claim to the blessings of God's people. For one thing, she's a foreigner. The author keeps reminding us of her nationality to make this point.

She's called Ruth the Moabite in verse 2. And again, the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab in verse 6.

Moabites weren't even allowed to enter God's assembly in Old Testament times. So, Ruth was an unlikely candidate to receive favour from Boaz. In fact, that was something that she herself understood.

Just look at verse 10 again. We're told then, she fell on her face bowing to the ground and said to him, Boaz, why have I found favour in your eyes that you should take notice of me since I am a foreigner?

[26 : 34] Ruth knew that she had no natural claim to God's blessing. More than that, she had no standing before Boaz. As a poor widow, she was as far down the social ladder as you could get.

Whereas in verse 1, we learn that Boaz was a worthy man, sometimes translated a man of standing. Look on with me to verse 13.

Halfway through the verse, Ruth says, You have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants. In other words, I'm lowlier even than one of your servants. Again, she acknowledges that she has no right to Boaz's blessing. And so, Ruth shows us how we receive God's favour.

It's all by grace, you see, by his undeserved love. If you think about it, Boaz's words to Ruth in verse 14, a remarkable, come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.

[27 : 49] Boaz invites this widow, this foreigner, this pauper, an outcast, I guess, to dine with him at his table.

It's a picture of fellowship offered to someone who had no claim to it. And it's a picture of God's grace to you and me because we don't deserve God's favour.

And like Ruth, we need to recognise as much. We have no natural claim on God's blessing. We're outcasts because of our sin.

And yet, in his grace, God offers us the hand of fellowship. So we've seen three wonderful truths about God and his son, the Lord Jesus, in this chapter.

We can trust his great providence, his generous provision, and his amazing grace. But how can we receive these things for ourselves?

[28 : 55] How, like Ruth, can we receive these blessings that we don't deserve? Well, verses 11 and 12 give us the answer if you look down at the passage one final time.

In verse 10, Ruth has expressed her amazement at why Boaz has taken such care over her. And Boaz replies, verse 11, All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.

The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Ruth had left behind her old life and taken refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. She'd left behind the pagan world in which she'd grown up and sought salvation in the one true God.

God. It's a wonderful picture to us of what it means to be a Christian, someone who leaves behind their old life and takes refuge under the wings of the God of Israel, whose mercy extends not only to Moabites, but even to Britons in the 21st century.

[30 : 16] We began with a poem, but let me close with those words of the Lord Jesus that we read in Matthew 23, which echo Boaz's words about God.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

Jesus, our glorious Boaz, longs for people to find refuge under his wings. I wonder if we'll imitate Ruth and do that.

Shall I lead us in prayer? The Lord repay you for what you have done and a full reward be given you by the Lord to the God of Israel under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Our Father, we know that we have no claim to your blessings, that we have no standing before you as we are. For just as Ruth and Naomi were materially destitute, so we are spiritually destitute in your sight.

[31 : 36] And so we thank you for what these verses teach us about your character. we thank you that you are a God of immense grace who gives to us what we do not deserve.

And we thank you that you are a God of providence who works all things for our good and a God of provision who gives us exactly what we need and far more.

And so we pray that you would help us to be those who, when life gets difficult, holds on to these truths about your character and continues to trust you, knowing that you are working all things for the good of those who love you.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.