



## Ruth Finding Favor in His Sight

### Ruth 2:1-23

We are continuing our studies in the book of Ruth, examining how God's kingdom comes to earth in an age of moral deterioration, political disaster and civil war that characterized the book of Judges. For Israel it came from the most unlikely place—Moab, through the lives of two bereaved widows who were caught up in God's *hesed* love—"unfailing love for the helpless." As we saw last week, the purpose of the book of Ruth is to illustrate the many facets of *hesed* love and the rewards that accompany those who practice it.

To review, *hesed* is a loving commitment within a relationship, where one party finds themselves helpless in a situation that threatens their survival and the other party, motivated by compassion, acts to meet that need. It is a voluntary act of extraordinary mercy and generosity, often "going beyond the call of duty," as we find in Ruth's vow to Naomi after she repeatedly urged Ruth to **turn back** to her family in Moab where there was a future.

**Stop pressing me to leave you,  
to turn back from following you.  
For where you go I will go,  
and where you lodge I will lodge.  
Your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
Where you die I will die,  
and there will I be buried.  
May the LORD do so to me and more also  
if anything but death parts me from you."** (Ruth 1:16-17)

Ellen Davis notes that when Ruth made that "decision to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem, she becomes in her own person not only a *widow* but also an *orphan* (having

no father or adult male in the household to protect her) and a *sojourner*. Thus, she embodies and embraces the three classic biblical categories of vulnerability, of those in need of protection within covenant community. As we shall see, Ruth is the first of several ‘vulnerable protectors’ in this book,”<sup>1</sup> as her example of “*hesed* moves others into the incalculable risk and joy of covenanted relationship.”<sup>2</sup> *Hesed* is contagious.

**Let not steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness forsake you;  
bind them around your neck;  
write them on the tablet of your heart.  
So you will find favor and good success  
in the sight of God and man. (Prov 3:3-4 ESV)**

Favor is what Ruth will be seeking as she continues her sacrificial acts of *hesed* love toward the living and the dead.

## **I. Ruth’s Initiative Seeking Favor (2:1-2)**

### **A. Introduction and setting (v. 1)**

**1 Now Naomi had a relative of her husband’s, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.**

After the enduring the agony of a family whose males were wiped out in Moab, the narrator gives us a hint that good news is on the horizon—Naomi has a relative from her husband’s clan. Like the other characters in the story, his name is significant. Boaz means “*in him* [i.e., the LORD] *is strength*,” and his stature is further highlighted by the distinctive description, *ish gibbor hayil*, literally, “a man mighty-in-strength” or “a mighty man of valor.” The title was most often used of physical power in reference to warriors. But here it suggests “a capable and powerful man with wealth” and, as the story unfolds, it speaks volumes of Boaz’s moral character.

### **B. Ruth’s Initiative seeking favor (v. 2)**

**2 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 favor.” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.”**

During the hundred plus miles walk back to Bethlehem, Ruth must have wondered how they would survive with no means of support. I suspect Naomi instructed her on the Lord’s generosity as Creator and his compassion for the poor and the sojourner. In Israel’s codified laws, God created a safety net for the poor by giving them ownership of the **gleanings** left by harvesters (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19).

**And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 23:22)**

The divine intention was that no one in the land would go hungry, nor would the poor lose their dignity, as their initiative and hard work was required to bring home the bacon. As an added benefit, the poor would become visible and recognized in the community, rather than shuffled off to a ghetto.

When this scene opens we must not forget the trauma that Naomi and Ruth have endured. Carolyn James notes that...

the kinds of losses Naomi and Ruth suffered—loss of a spouse, loss of a child, financial collapse, and a major move—are among the unwelcome life events that can trigger depression. Wounds afflicted by traumas of this magnitude do not easily heal, and the accompanying painful memories have remarkable staying power. We can reasonably assume that both women are battling depression. Yes, even Ruth. Both feel the gloomy pall that hangs on long after the flurry of funeral activity subsides...In the dismal aftermath, even the simple task of getting out of bed in the morning can be asking too much. It's never easy to carry on with life in a world that has been emptied of a loved one."<sup>3</sup>

All of that is to say that Ruth demonstrates remarkable faith by taking the initiative and requesting Naomi to let her go and "*glean after him in whose sight I shall find favor.*" Facing the same depressing realities as Naomi, she allows her choices to be shaped by her vow. Gleaning for food as an unattached young woman in a foreign land was a scary proposition. Harvesters could get rough and gleaners were often mistreated and went home hungry. Nonetheless, her request exudes a confident expectation that God is at work and that something new may happen in the fields of Bethlehem today.

The verb "glean" becomes the theme word of the chapter, found twelve times, always with Ruth as its subject, which demonstrates that "passivity" and maintaining "the status quo" are not in Ruth's tool box. Naomi grants her permission, calling Ruth "my daughter," affectionately acknowledging her adoption into God's family.

## II. The Character of Ruth Observed (2:3-7)

### A. The right place at the right time (vv. 3-4)

3 So she set out and went and **gleaned** in the field after the reapers, and **by chance she happened upon** the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech. 4 And look, Boaz is coming from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, "The LORD be with you!" And they answered, "The LORD bless you."

By sheer chance (lit. "*chanced a chance*") from a human perspective, Ruth happened upon the portion of the field that belonged to Naomi's relative. At some time later, she looks up and "behold" she sees the owner of the field approaching to check in with his foreman on the progress of the harvest. Ruth happens to be at the right place at just the right time.

What happens next is music to Ruth's ears. Boaz greets his workers with, "**The LORD be with you!**" and they respond with, "**The LORD bless you!**" Some commentators suggest that these are just the conventional greetings of the day, but against the dark backdrop of the book of Judges, where God's name was blasphemed on a daily basis, these words resound with holy beauty. Hearing the love and respect these men have for each other and their faith, summoning the covenant making God to be present among them must have caused Ruth's expectations to soar. "By wandering into this particular field the grieving, impoverished, socially isolated Ruth has entered a sanctuary of God's presence."<sup>4</sup>

### B. Boaz inquires about Ruth's identity (vv. 5-7)

5 Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" 6 And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the young (*na'arâ*) **Moabite** woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of **Moab**. 7 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."

Upon arrival, Boaz asks the foreman about the identity of the unknown young woman who was gleaning in his field by probing her family origins. The immediacy of the question communicates a lot about his character that people are more important than profit, especially those who are vulnerable.

The foreman identifies Ruth by her national origin as the Moabite, who came back with Naomi. Then he gives Boaz a sterling assessment of Ruth's character. First, he notes that she asked permission "to glean and gather **among the sheaves** after the reapers." This was a highly unusual request, which he apparently granted before Boaz arrived. Then he was amazed how she worked non-stop with unusual industry, barely taking time to rest. To understand the nature of her request **Carolyn James...**

Typically when harvesting a field, hired men went first—grasping a handful of standing grain stalks with one hand, cutting them off at the base with sickle, then laying the cut stalks on the ground. Female workers followed, gathering and binding cut grain into bundles to be carted to the threshing floor where raw kernels of grain were separated from the husks. Gleaners came last and were permitted in the fields only after both teams of hired workers finished and bundled sheaves of grain were removed from the field.<sup>5</sup>

That was the accepted pattern, but Ruth is on a mission to feed her mother-in-law and boldly requests that she go in front of the women immediately behind the harvesters before the sheaves had been gathered up and where there was plenty of new cut grain.

Ruth showed herself to be anything but a modest, self-effacing foreigner. Rather, she emerges as courageous, if not slightly brash. Probably aware of possible rejection and ostracism, she willingly took a sizable risk in order to benefit her mother-in-law.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes newcomers have a way of showing us we've settled into a narrow, precise obedience—a tidy conformity to the law—that falls short of what God really intends. "The law says let them glean, the spirit of the law says, "feed them," How much do they need?

The famed chef, José Andrés, through his nonprofit World Central Kitchen, quickly set up facilities across the country to provide meals for people fleeing the war. They were on the ground in Ukraine one day after the Russian invasion. The nonprofit, which partnered with restaurants in the country, is serving food at hundreds of locations in 12 Ukrainian cities and has sites in Poland, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia for refugees who crossed the border to safety.<sup>7</sup>

What will Boaz do?

### **III. Interchange Between Ruth and Boaz (2:8-17)**

#### **A. Boaz's recognition of Ruth, gives her food and protection (vv. 8-9)**

**8 Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Have you not heard my daughter—do not go to glean in another field and also do not pass on from here, and so shall you cling close to my young women. 9 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."**

Todd Linafelt outlines the rhetoric of Boaz's address, showing that the speech is framed by two interrogatives that envelope four imperative sentences:<sup>8</sup>

**A** "Have you not heard, my daughter—

**B** do not go to glean in another field,  
and also do not pass on from here,

**B'** and so shall you cling (*davaq*) to my young women.  
Let your eyes be on the field which they are reaping,  
and go after them.

**A'** Have I not charged the young men not to touch you?

Boaz's response is heroic. He addresses Ruth as "my daughter," signaling that he accepts her as a true Israelite. Knowing that Ruth is not likely to find favor elsewhere in Israel at this time, Boaz instructs her not to leave his field and to cleave to his female workers who are gathering the sheaves and to stay focused on where they are reaping, which is normally off limits to gleaners.

In order to ensure Ruth's safety, Boaz instructs his male workers not to lay a hand on the foreigner or chase her off. Finally, if she is thirsty, he instructs her to drink from water jars his men fill, rather than seeking refreshment elsewhere and losing precious time gleaning.

#### **B. Ruth is humbled and learns of her reputation (vv. 10-13)**

**10 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?"**

Confounded by Boaz's unexpected outpouring of protection and generosity, Ruth falls to the ground in an exceptional display of gratitude. She is surprised and overwhelmed that she, a foreigner, has found favor in his eyes.

**11 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. 12 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!"**

This is the climatic center of the scene, as Boaz reveals that his kindness was motivated by Ruth's unprecedented acts of *hesed* to Naomi and Elimelech, which have been front page news in Bethlehem. With praise and admiration he affirms what Ruth solemnly vowed to Naomi as following in the footsteps of Abraham who, by faith, left country and family to a land he didn't know to follow God. Abraham, however, was given the promise of infinite blessings in a new land and descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. Ruth, who was barren with no male protector, had no such promise. And now that Ruth has arrived in Bethlehem, he has seen with his own eyes the enormous risks she continues to take as she earnestly gleans to feed her mother-in-law. So he prays that the Lord will repay her according to her unfailing love and a full "reward," just as God promised Abraham ("*your reward will be great,*" Gen 15:1).

The final image—"seeking refuge under God's wings"—places this young woman at the center of God's care and protection, not to mention the heart of Israel's redemption story. If you wonder what gave Boaz and unusual compassion for outsiders, he was influenced by Rahab, the converted Canaanite prostitute, who is in his lineage.

**13 Then she said, "May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken to the heart of your servant, though I am not [even] like one of your servant-girls."**

Humbly accepting his grace, Ruth hesitantly claims her new identity as his maidservant (*šiphah*). This is the first time the narrator allows to see past Ruth's bold exterior into the innerworkings of her heart and the all-consuming grief that she had been laboring under. Boaz's kindness and gentle words went straight to her heart and causes her to long for more of Boaz's favor. Fortunately, she doesn't have to wait long as Boaz approaches her at the mealtime break.

### C. Boaz elevates Ruth (vv. 14-17)

**14 And at mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.” So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over.**

After granting Ruth exceptional privileges to glean, he invites her into the intimacy of his table at the noon meal alongside the paid workers. After he seats her, he serves her himself, bestowing so much more roasted grain than she can eat and sends the rest of home in a doggy bag for her mother-in-law. This was probably the first satisfying meal she had had in years. Carolyn James captures the moment: “This is a powerful gospel scene: a gleaner seated alongside paid workers, a Moabiteess “dining” with Israelites, a man serving a woman, the poor included among the rich, an outsider embraced by the inner circle.” Boaz’s generous actions demonstrate the importance of crossing social barriers and breaking societal rules to raise the dignity of the marginalized by sharing a meal with them.

**15 When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. 16 And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.” 17 So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley.**

After granting Ruth exceptional privileges, Boaz ensures that she will not be hindered carrying them out, by instructing the men not to touch or harass her in any way. In addition, he instructs his workers to assist her by pulling out stalks of cut grain and placing it in her path. By making them responsible for Ruth’s success, he is giving them the privilege of participating in acts of *hesed*—loving sacrificially.

Boaz’s generosity and the workers’ cooperation spur Ruth’s initiative all the more. This gives us an insight into the mystery of how divine grace and human initiative go hand in hand. By the end of the day after gleaning and winnowing, Ruth accumulated about an ephah of barley (approximately 29 pounds). Carolyn James notes that “Old Babylonian records from that era indicate a male worker’s take-home pay for a day’s labor were rarely more than one or two pounds. That’s roughly equivalent to a half-month’s wages, or fifteen times what Boaz’s harvesters were receiving for a day’s way.”<sup>9</sup>



#### **IV. Returning Home to Naomi (2:18-23)**

**18 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.**

Joy must have filled Ruth's heart as she anticipates seeing the look on Naomi's face when comes home. Given Naomi's depressed condition, I suspect that the endless hours worrying about her daughter-in-law's safety were torture. There is no way to describe her shock by what she saw when Ruth arrived at the door heavy laden with grain. But there was more. Inside Ruth's cloak she pulled out her left overs of roasted grain. Hubbard notes, "By now Naomi's head was probably spinning. To glean so much grain was astounding, but to come home with cooked food was a shock that required explaining."<sup>10</sup>

**19 And her mother-in-law said to her, "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 worked today is Boaz."**

Naomi's questions come in a rush. Even before Ruth has a chance to answer, Naomi is offering blessings for her unknown benefactor. Ruth heightens the suspense leaving the climatic name to the last word of her sentence—Boaz!

**20 And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness (*hesed*) 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."**

The news triggers an immediate and dramatic transformation in Naomi. Her bitterness evaporates instantly as dew under the heat of the sun. May he be blessed of the Lord, who has not stopped showing *hesed* love to the living and the dead. Then she reveals to Ruth the good news that the landowner is one of their relatives.

**21 And Ruth the Moabite said, "Besides, he said to me, 'You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.'" 22 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."**

Having learned that Boaz was a relative, gives Ruth fresh understanding of why Boaz has given her extraordinary gleaning privileges for the duration of the harvest. Naomi, sensing Ruth's naivete, slightly but profoundly corrects her understanding that she is not to stay close to the "young men" but to the "young women," lest she be assaulted.

**23 So she clung to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law.**

The provision was good, but only temporary. Ruth went back to work in the fields of Bethlehem day in and day out for seven weeks from Passover to Pentecost. During that time, Boaz's field continued to be a sanctuary of protection, abundance and communion under the wings of God's *hesed*-love. But what happens when the harvest is over? We must wait until next week.

### **Postscript:**

The ancient story is taking on astronomical proportions in Ukraine today. In Ruth there was famine and death; in Ukraine it is mass genocide and destruction, and yet acts of *hesed* love too numerous to count encircle the horror. When refugees arrive in

**Poland** more than hot meals are waiting for them. Photos of myriads baby strollers, stuffed animals and backpacks line the boarding and departure areas of the train station.

I've been especially moved by a good friend, Connie Fortunato, the founder of Music Camp International. For over thirty years she has worked with the orphans and children with special needs in Romania and Ukraine and, in one week's time, she would transform them into a choir performing classical pieces with the Philharmonic orchestras.





Connie is a modern day Ruth, who believes God can do the impossible and has no fear facing Goliath-like opposition. While the rest of the world seems paralyzed by government bureaucracy and small mindedness, she believes God's kingdom of raising the poor from the ash heap has already invaded the present and is available to any who will lay hold of it.

Her work in Ukraine became one of her most prized efforts. She began working in Kiev with the blind, who were treated like animals and through the gift of music she not only transformed their lives, but the attitude of a nation. In Kiev, she labored relentlessly for refugee children while war was raging in the East Ukraine. In May 2014 she was named "Honorary Ambassador of Peace for Ukraine," the only non-Ukrainian to ever receive this award.

Now she's planning on putting on Music Camps of 500-600 children in the five countries housing refugees from Ukraine in Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Moldova and Poland. The choirs will consist of 500-600 children, 50% Ukrainian refugees, 50% youth from host countries to build bridges...bringing them all together in a mass choir of 2500 children for stadium events to rebuild hope and courage in the hearts of the people. May the Lord bring peace to Ukraine.

**Let your work be shown to your servants,  
and your glorious power to their children.  
Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,  
and establish the work of our hands upon us;  
yes, establish the work of our hands! (Ps 90:16-17 ESV)**

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- <sup>1</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 166-67.
- <sup>2</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Preaching the Luminous World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 61.
- <sup>3</sup> Carolyn Custis James, *The Gospel of Ruth, Loving God Enough to Break the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 93.
- <sup>4</sup> James, *The Gospel of Ruth*, 96
- <sup>5</sup> James, *The Gospel of Ruth*, 101.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert J. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 150.
- <sup>7</sup> "All Things Considered" March 13, 2021. <https://wamu.org/story/22/03/13/with-world-central-kitchen-jose-andres-works-to-feed-ukrainians-on-the-frontlines/>
- <sup>8</sup> Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beale, *Ruth and Esther: Berit Olam, Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (ed. David W. Cotter; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 33.
- <sup>9</sup> James, *The Gospel of Ruth*, 112.
- <sup>10</sup> Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, 181.