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Ruth 2:1-23

Third Message

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# FROM FAMINE TO FEASTING

*SERIES: FROM EMPTINESS TO FULLNESS*

Have you ever had an encounter that seemed like mere chance at the time but when you look back on it you see the hand of God? My wife Amy and I are coming up on our 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary. We were set up by friends, and the first time I met her was on a blind date. Who would have known from that unexpected encounter I would be so blessed for over 20 years...and counting?

I agree with David Atkinson, who wrote, "Life appears as a tangle of unconnected threads. But faith in the gracious providence of God carries with it the certainty that those tangled threads are but the back of the tapestry, the front of which spells a message of hope and grace."<sup>1</sup>

This morning we will look at chapter 2 of Ruth, where we will see a few tangled threads beginning to form a beautiful tapestry. Last week we reflected on Ruth's amazing *hesed* (lovingkindness) in action as she left her home in Moab and clung to Naomi and her God in spite of the unpromising future that Naomi anticipated.

Naomi was a woman with shattered dreams. She was bitter. She believed the Lord had stopped showing his *hesed* love to her by taking her husband and two sons and leaving her empty. Yet, at the end of chapter 1 we learned that the Lord was working behind the scenes. For those who had the eyes to see there was a glimmer of hope as the barley harvest was about to begin.

Chapter 1 encompassed over 10 years, but chapter 2 focuses on a single day in the life of these poor widows Ruth and Naomi. This day starts out like any other, but by the end their hunger and despair have given way to satisfaction and hope. The Lord brings them from famine to feasting through the kind acts of one man, who is introduced in verse 1.

## Boaz introduced 2:1

**Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz. (Ruth 2:1 TNIV)**

Up to this point Naomi and Ruth have not received any assistance from their extended family. This is why this opening sentence of chapter 2 is so important. It sets the stage for what follows.

During the time of Ruth, Israel was a kinship- and agricultural-based society. The all-important family property was passed from father to son as an inheritance, and preserved as long as the family name continued. Family solidarity was ex-

tremely important. Members of the wider extended clan were expected to help and protect one another when needs arose.

Do Ruth and Naomi have a relative in Bethlehem in a position to can help them? Yes they do. But the narrator builds suspense by waiting to give the man's name until all his particulars are given. He is a relative on Naomi's husband's side (so far so good), a man of standing (a well-respected and influential man of wealth), from the clan of Elimelek (perfect), whose name was Boaz.

The narrator gives a clear indication by this detailed description of Boaz that he has all the proper qualifications. He is a well-respected and influential man of means who was related to Naomi's late husband. He is a godly man, and definitely in a position to help Ruth and Naomi. The question is, how will their paths cross? and will Boaz help when they do?

## Ruth steps out in faith 2:2-3

**And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek." (2:2-3)**

Returning from Moab, the pressing issue for Ruth and Naomi is how they will survive as widows. With tremendous determination and no hint of self-pity or timidity, Ruth takes initiative. As a dutiful daughter-in-law she asks for and receives permission from Naomi to go into the fields and glean leftover grain.

Gleaning in that day was an expression of God's love and concern for the poor in the Promised Land. The practice was a gracious provision in the law that allowed orphans, widows, and sojourners the opportunity to sustain themselves. Landowners were commanded to leave the edges of their fields unharvested so that the poor could come and glean what they needed. In addition, if the reapers in the act of harvesting dropped grain on the ground, they were not allowed to pick it up. They had to leave it so that the poor could follow behind and gather what they needed (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19).

Gleaning, a key word in the passage, is used in one form or another 12 times in this chapter, highlighting Ruth's desperate situation. The only way she will be able to survive is if she finds favor in the eyes of a righteous landowner. She is a poor widow

from Moab, at the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. She is at the mercy of those around her.

Even though gleaning was lawful, it was still risky. Not every landowner permitted it. As a female foreigner, Ruth was vulnerable to all kinds of physical and emotional mistreatment by the men and the women out in the fields. She must have felt lonely and afraid, a stranger in a new culture. Yet she steps out in faith and trusts in the Lord, walking through the door of gleaning that he has opened for her. In fact, the Lord is with her every step of the way.

The phrase, “As it turned out it,” is the narrator’s way of highlighting that from an earthly perspective it may seem like a chance occurrence that she gleans in a field belonging to Boaz. But those with eyes of faith can see that the Lord was moving on her behalf. This is confirmed one verse later as another so-called “coincidence” happens, when Boaz just happens to arrive from Bethlehem to examine his field and workers on Ruth’s first day of gleaning.

#### **Boaz notices Ruth 2:4-7**

**Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, “The LORD be with you!” “The LORD bless you!” they answered. Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, “Whose young woman is that?” The foreman replied, “She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She came into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.” (2:4-7)**

The first words out of Boaz’s mouth are a blessing upon the harvesters in the name of the Lord. Such a greeting reveals Boaz as a man of faith, and gives immediate insight into his character. The workers respond to Boaz with a blessing as well, giving evidence that he is a man worthy of respect and praise.

The fact that Boaz allows gleaning shows that he is loyal to the Lord and a willing participant in caring for the needy. He is attentive not just to the details of his work, but more importantly, to the people around him. A selfish businessman would not have noticed the gleaners. He probably would have resented them as intruders detrimental to his profit margin. Boaz was not that way. He notices a new gleaner in his field and inquires from his foreman about the identity and family connections of this unknown woman.

The foreman does not use Ruth’s name, probably because he did not ask; he simply identifies her as “the Moabite.” She is the immigrant, the foreigner who came back with Naomi. The foreman volunteers additional information about Ruth that sheds light on her character as well. She is humble (she asked permission to glean) and hard working (she worked all morning with hardly any break).

Evidently, Ruth and Naomi had been the talk of the town. Boaz had heard their story but had not yet met Ruth. Now he finds her hard at work in his field. He knows she is unlikely

to get favorable treatment elsewhere, so he approaches her and makes a generous offer.

#### **Boaz protects and provides for Ruth 2:8-16**

**So Boaz said to Ruth, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the harvesters are working, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.” At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?” (2:8-9)**

Though there is great social disparity between Boaz and Ruth, he honors her and takes the initiative to meet her needs. A foreigner is usually not shown favor, yet Boaz treats her with respect and kindness. Gleaning involved a lot of hard work and long hours. After several hours of labor under the hot sun, I doubt there was anything about Ruth’s outward appearance that drew him to her. Boaz reached out to her not because of any romantic attraction, but because she was a woman in need and he was a godly man filled with a spirit of generosity.

Boaz demonstrates his care and concern for Ruth in a number of ways. He initiates kindness to her by the way he reaches out to her. He does not approach her as if she was an outsider and he was her master. No, he addresses her as “my daughter.” This hints at the age difference between them. But more importantly, it signals that Boaz sees her as a virtuous young woman and accepts her as a true member of the covenant community.

Boaz protects her from harm. He is a godly man, eager to keep Ruth safe and protect her virtue. For her safety, he exhorts her not to go glean in another field but to “cling” to his team of workers, and instructs his men not to touch her.

He anticipates her need and fulfills it generously. His invitation for her to drink freely from the water jars is a privilege not ordinarily permitted for the gleaners. By encouraging Ruth to stay in his field and drink from his water jars he is graciously elevating her status. He is offering his full protection and giving her all the same benefits enjoyed by his team of regular workers.

Can you imagine the impact these kind words and generous actions from Boaz must have had on Ruth? This is probably the first bit of compassion she has received since she left Moab. Up to this point she was an isolated widow from a foreign land, treated as a lowly outsider and struggling with hunger and fear. Now, because of the gracious actions of one man, she has been made to feel welcome among the people of God.

Overwhelmed by Boaz’s unexpected protection and generosity, Ruth bows down with her face to the ground as a gesture of deep appreciation and gratitude. She immediately recognizes Boaz’s behavior as an act of special favor that far exceeds his

legal obligation toward a gleaner. Truly awestruck and amazed at this outpouring of generosity, she asks him why she has found such favor in his eyes. His reply further illustrates his godly character.

**Boaz replied, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” “May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord,” she said. “You have reassured me and have spoken kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.” (2:11-13)**

Ruth found favor in Boaz’s eyes because he was genuinely moved by her sacrificial love toward Naomi. Ruth’s faith and loyal-love are praiseworthy because, just like Abraham, she left all that she once called home to live in a land with a people she did not know.

Ruth’s tremendous act of faith and selflessness brings forth from Boaz a prayer of blessing upon her. He asks the Lord to generously make up all that she had lost in leaving her family and home to seek refuge under his wings. Like a young bird that finds safety and comfort under the wing of its parent, Boaz prays that Ruth will find protection and provision under the Lord’s loving care.

Greatly reassured and comforted by Boaz’s kind words, Ruth responds with a prayer of her own to continue to find favor in his eyes. Boaz is more than just a man with kind words. Not only does he pray for Ruth to be blessed, he proceeds to become an agent of blessing in her life.

**At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.” When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, “Let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don’t rebuke her.” (2:14-16)**

Boaz is the kind of man who uses his wealth and position to bless others in need. Rather than leave Ruth at a distance at the noontime meal, he invites her into his close circle to dine with him and his team. Boaz serves her himself and gives Ruth more than enough to satisfy her. He bestows on her so much bread and roasted grain that she eats all she wants and has some left over.

When Ruth resumes gleaning, seeking to make her work easier and more beneficial, Boaz instructs his workers to allow her to glean among the sheaves without any trouble. Additionally, he tells them to deliberately pull out stalks of grain that were already bundled so that she would have even more.

Boaz acts as God’s servant to bless Ruth. He allows her to glean in his field, gives her food and water, draws her in from the margins to the center of his group, and sends her home with plenty to share with Naomi. His kindness and generosity border on extravagance.

When Ruth returned home there was plenty to eat, and also plenty to talk about.

**Ruth reports to Naomi her encounter with Boaz 2:17-23**

**So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough. Her mother-in-law asked her, “Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!” Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. “The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz,” she said. Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed of the LORD who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead.” She added, “That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers.” Then Ruth the Moabite said, “He even said to me, ‘Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.’” Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, “It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else’s field you might be harmed.” So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law. (2:17-23)**

Because of her hard work all day, and the special favor she received from Boaz, Ruth collects a staggering amount of grain for one day’s work. An ephah would weigh anywhere from 30 to 50 pounds—enough grain to sustain herself and Naomi for at least a few weeks. Upon her arrival home, Ruth proudly displays to her mother-in-law all that she had gleaned that day, and also gives to Naomi the leftovers she had saved from her special noontime meal.

Naomi was astonished at what Ruth had gathered. This was so much more food than what she could have expected or anticipated. She questions Ruth excitedly: “Where did you glean today? Whose field were you in? Blessed be the man who showed favor to you.”

Upon learning that Ruth had gleaned in the field of Boaz, Naomi proclaims a blessing upon Boaz and praises the Lord for he had not stopped showing his loving-kindness to her and her family. Previously, Naomi felt that the hand of the Lord was against her. But now she sees the bountiful food and the encounter with Boaz as undeniable evidence of God’s goodness and grace.

Her bitterness has melted into joy not only at the immediate blessing of food, but because there is hope that Boaz may act as their kinsman-redeemer. According to Israelite law

and custom, a “kinsman-redeemer” is the nearest male relative who has the duty to bring justice, protection, and redemption to relatives in need. A kinsman-redeemer can redeem those in his clan in some unique ways: Act as a blood redeemer—avenge the death of a family member (Num 35:19-21; Deut 19:4-13); redeem property that had been sold to pay debts (Lev 25:25); redeem a relative who had sold himself into slavery (Lev 25:47-49); redeem the family name and property by marrying the childless widow of a deceased relative (Deut 25:5-10).

This last responsibility is the most pertinent to Naomi and Ruth. It is the custom of levirate marriage. If a man dies without children, a kinsman-redeemer is to marry the man’s widow and produce an heir for him so that his name and land are preserved.

The detailed introduction of Boaz in the first verse of this chapter held out the possibility and heightened the expectation that he will act to redeem and restore Naomi and Ruth. In one sense he has already acted as a kinsman redeemer, because he has redeemed them from their physical hunger. Boaz has satisfied their immediate need. But their long-term restoration has not been resolved. Ruth needs a husband and Naomi a male heir to redeem the family property and continue the family name. The plot thickens. The question remains: will Boaz be the one to do this?

As I reflect on this passage, the reference to Boaz lovingly reaching out to Ruth as kinsman-redeemer directs my eyes beyond him to Jesus who is our Savior and Redeemer. Once we too were foreigners to God’s kingdom. We were outsiders, doomed to sin and death, completely unable to save ourselves. Yet God in his lovingkindness reached out to save us through his Son Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul put it this way, “He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (Eph 2:17-19).

What good news! Many of us struggle with the sin in our life and wonder how it is that God loves us so much and desires to draw us into his family. We wonder, “Why me Lord? Why have you shown me such favor and extravagant love?” This redemption is not for anything we have done, but because of who God is. This is an encouraging word for all of us. What amazing love that, in spite of our history of sin, if we are in Christ, our Heavenly Father looks with favor upon us. Through his Spirit we have been given freely from all that he has. He anticipated our need and has richly blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Fortified with this assurance we are able to live a life of faith and generosity knowing we have nothing to lose. We do not

know what the future holds, but we know that the one who holds the future loves us and will never forsake us.

One of the things I enjoy about this chapter is that each of the three main characters, Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi, are surprised in some way. Each of them is caught off guard. Even though their encounters seem coincidental, we can see how the Lord’s loving hand is unfolding the events of this story. I am coming to understand and appreciate more and more that God is our divine appointment-maker. We, too, are involved in the drama of God’s unfolding purpose. There are no “chance” encounters. “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:10).

Given this to be true, it is our privilege to walk each day in faith, keeping our eyes open to the needs of those around us. The opportunities are everywhere. Who are those in need in our neighborhood, at our work, and in this church that we can love and treat like family?

Many of you are already loving each other in this way. I know, because I have been the recipient of your love. It is my encouragement to you not to lose heart in doing good. It is my hope and prayer that as brothers and sisters in Christ we would continue to move beyond just surface-level conversations and take the initiative to really get to know each other, to share our lives and explore each other’s hopes, fears, pain, and needs so that we can know how to help one another.

I am struck that in our current financial and job climate it is not just the orphans, widows, and elderly who need our help. One of the ways we can tangibly express the love of God is by reaching out to the unemployed. Some people who are unemployed may have a savings cushion, but others do not. Your prayers for them will be much appreciated. As you reflect on the list of unemployed in the bulletin insert, how is the Lord leading you? Are you good at helping to write a resume? Do you enjoy making and delivering meals? Even the smallest gesture can be a big encouragement.

My brother who was recently unemployed told me how touched he was when one day the family awoke to a gift basket on their front porch, with an anonymous note of encouragement attached. He couldn’t stop singing the Lord’s praises.

This kind of selfless generosity does not come naturally or easily. In our own strength we are unable to love each other in this way, but God’s love is within us. May we become a people known for our prayers and actions of love and generosity toward one another. May we become the blessing we pray for.

<sup>1</sup> David Atkinson, *The Message of Ruth* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 63).