

Ruth 2:1-16 Gleaning, Grace, and Gratitude

We've been taking our time working our way through the book of Ruth. We stopped to consider how to deal with disappointment with God and with the issue of bitterness. Now we are ready to get back into the story.

Ruth and Naomi are in Bethlehem. The narrator tells us an important detail: this part of the story happened during the time of the barley harvest (1:22), i.e., in March or April. Poor people like Naomi and Ruth could glean in the fields during the harvest, so it was fortunate for them that they had a means of getting food for themselves.

Remember that the theme of the book is how God demonstrates His faithfulness by loving, superintending, and caring for His people. Chapter 2 begins to show how God is going to provide for Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. As we see God provide for them, we should be encouraged to believe that God will also provide for us if we are like Ruth and Boaz. The story here emphasizes the good character and faithfulness of these two people. God provides for his people when they are faithful like Ruth and Boaz were. So they serve as good examples for us.

Normally speaking, God provides for us in the same way that we see him providing for Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz—through hard work and through relationships with other people. As we are faithful to God, we can expect him to meet our needs.

Let's consider some of the ways God providentially provides for his people.

- I. God provides providentially through individual initiative/diligence. .2, 5-7
 - A. Ruth and Naomi were poor widows, and people like that didn't have many options. There were no government programs for them. They couldn't work a normal job like a man could. Typically, women were dependent on their husbands or their family. These two widow women didn't have any particular means of support.
 - B. But what widows and other poor people had was the right to glean in the fields. The OT welfare system was gleaning. After the harvest was brought in, people had the right to go into the fields and pick up what the harvesters had left behind, i.e., to gather up the scraps/leftovers.

- C. The OT law commands farmers to leave the corners of their fields unharvested for this very reason. During the harvest, if they dropped some grain, they should leave it for the gleaners (Lev 19:9; 23:22; Deut 24:19). The weakest and most vulnerable in society could provide for themselves through gleaning.
- D. Gleaning was not easy work. After laboring a whole day, you might have gathered enough to feed yourself for a day or two. It was menial, tedious labor. But that's was available to Ruth, and she was willing to do it.
- E. .2 Ruth shows initiative here. She determines to go out into the fields and glean whatever she could find.
1. Notice that the narrator describes Ruth again as "the Moabitess." The narrator wants to remind us that Ruth is a helpless foreigner, a woman with virtually no resources or support.
 2. But Ruth is not as helpless as we might imagine. She has initiative, diligence, and intelligence. She's ready to work to earn a living. She has not given up hope.
 3. .2b BTW, "ears of corn" refers to heads of grain. Remember that is happened during the barley harvest. So don't get the idea that Ruth is out there gleaning among the corn stalks. "Corn" is just the generic word for "grain."
 4. .2c She plans to glean in a field where the workers would show here "grace/favor." Some field workers would be gracious and considerate of the poor, but some would not be. Field owners and workers sometimes denied the poor the right to glean in their fields. So Ruth was hopeful that she'd find some merciful field workers who would let her glean.
- F. Ruth takes the initiative here. Naomi didn't send her into the fields; it was Ruth's idea. Instead of throwing a pity party, she gets to work. She's assertive in confronting her problem head-on.

App: Success usually comes to people who have initiative and determination, not to those who sit around and complain about their terrible circumstances. Success is often the result of hard work. Successful people overcome their difficulties, usually through great effort.

Prov 10:4b *the hand of the diligent makes rich.*

Difficult circumstances lead some people to depression and self-indulgence. The same circumstances lead others to hard work and determination. We can either help ourselves or hurt ourselves by how we respond to trials and hardship. Ruth responded to her problems by getting to work.

Hard work is usually the way out of poverty. What if Ruth had been unwilling to work? Perhaps she never would have met Boaz. Boaz found Ruth attractive partly because she was a diligent worker.

Successful people usually see diligence and initiative as good characteristics. Success in life largely depends on your initiative and your work ethic. Successful people don't wait for others to fix their problems; they fix their own problems, usually through their own efforts.

- G. .7 Ruth had come out to a field and asked permission to glean. After gaining permission, she went to work.

“Sheaves” were the bound up bundles of barley. Typically, the men would cut the barley with sickles, and the women would come behind them, *bundling* up armfuls of barley and *binding* them into sheaves.

It seems possible that Ruth didn't quite understand how gleaning was supposed to work. Gleaners generally came into the fields *after* the harvesters were finished. You didn't glean “among the sheaves.” But for whatever reason, the overseer/foreman allowed her to go ahead. Ruth found “grace/favor” in the eyes of this foreman/supervisor.

- H. .7b She had started in the morning and persisted all day. “She tarried a little in the house” – house in this sense is a hut or a simple shelter of some kind. A farmer would set up this shelter for the workers to take a break in.

Temporary shelters, made of upright poles and covered with leafy branches or straw, were quite common in the ancient Near East.¹

- I. Ruth had worked hard for most of the day. She had rested for only a few minutes; otherwise, she'd been gleaning since she arrived. She was a hard worker.

¹ F. B. Huey Jr., “Ruth,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 529.

App: God still provides through hard work, initiative, and diligence. Paul tells us that if someone doesn't want to work, then he should not expect to eat (2 Th 3:10). If we are not willing to work for a living, then we should not be angry if God does not provide for us.

In our culture, the government provides huge welfare benefits for those who either can't work or don't want to work. One of the things that is bankrupting our country is the welfare system. It's a great shame and tragedy when the government pays people not to work. The welfare system ought to include a way to earn benefits *through* work.

The Bible values hard work, initiative, and diligence. Normally, God provides for us through work and labor. Ruth is a good example of someone who is willing to work for what she gets. She does not expect someone else to solve her problems. She is willing to work to take care of herself and Naomi.

Likewise, we should not expect others to bail us out or provide for us what we could provide for ourselves. In most cases, God provides for us through work.

Trans: God provides for us through diligent work and initiative.

II. God provides providentially through seemingly random circumstances. .3

- A. .3b The narrator presents Ruth's choice of fields to glean in as blind chance or accident. He says that her "hap" was to "light" on a field belonging to Boaz. She just happened to choose that field.
- B. The Hebrew says literally "her chance chanced upon" the part of the field belonging to Boaz. The language emphasizes that this happened by chance. She could have gleaned in any field, but she happened to choose Boaz's field. It seems like a random choice, but it turns out to be very important one that sets the course for the rest of her life.
- C. We see the hand of God at work behind this seemingly random choice. The point is that what seemed to be luck or chance was really the providential work of God.

Quote: The same hand that had sent the famine (1:1) and later provided food (1:6) is the hand that had brought Naomi and Ruth to Bethlehem precisely at the beginning of the harvest (1:22) and has now guided Ruth to that portion of the field belonging specifically to Boaz.²

² Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 653–654.

Part of the purpose of the story is to show God's providential guidance even through seemingly random circumstances or accidents. What may seem to us like chance happenings or random occurrences are really under God's providential control. God can use even accidental choices to fulfill his purposes.

From a human point of view, it seems like events happen by chance. Random things happen all the time. But from God's perspective, are they random? Is there chance or luck in a universe under God's sovereign control? No. God providentially controls the seemingly random, chance events of our lives.

You never know how important some of these seemingly random events can be. What may seem like coincidence or random events may turn out to be the very thing that God uses to guide or provide for us.

It's critical that we ask God to guide our steps and our choices (cf. Prov 16:9). We don't know when the next random event might lead to very important consequences. We trust God to guide us and put us in the right place at the right time. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord" (Ps 37:23).

Trans: God provides through personal initiative/diligence, through seemingly random circumstances, and...

III. God provides providentially through people. .1, 4f

The old saying is: "It's not *what* you know; it's *whom* you know." I have found that to be true in my life. Virtually every chapter of my life has been influenced by the people I know. **E.g.,** Scott Williquette.

Developing relationship and networks of friends and co-workers is very important. You never know how your relationships with others will have an impact on your life. It's in our best interests to develop and maintain good relationships.

Success in life often depends on our relationships with other people.

.4a In the providence of God, Boaz shows up at his field to check on the work. Note the language: "Behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem." The word "behold" draws our attention to the fact that something important is happening. The hero has arrived. The right person shows up at the right place at the right time. It's almost like someone is coordinating these events.

Quote: The suggestion that Ruth's encounter with Boaz was by blind chance is offset by the emphasis throughout the story on God's providential guidance. From the perspective of Ruth and Boaz, the meeting was accidental, but not from God's perspective.³

That's what we must keep in mind. The seemingly random events of our lives are the result of God's providential guidance, not blind luck or chance. God is directing our steps; he's providing for us through the people we meet.

Let's notice several things the passage tells us several things about Boaz.

A. .1 He was a relative of Elimelech; probably not a brother, but maybe a cousin, perhaps an uncle. Boaz is part of the same extended family or clan as Naomi's dead husband. Because he is a near kinsman, he has certain rights and responsibilities that come into play later in the story.

If this family relationship had not existed, Boaz could not have played the role of kinsman redeemer. But in the providence of God, Boaz turns out to be a near-kinsman.

B. .1 He was a "mighty man of wealth." Someone translated it as "a man of substance and standing." The words suggest both wealth and good character. We see aspects of Boaz's good character throughout this passage. Boaz was both wealthy and virtuous. He's a distinguished, honorable man.

App: Unfortunately, wealth and good character are rarely found in the same person. Money is a root of all kinds of evil. Jesus said that it was harder for a rich person to be saved than it was for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. He also said that we can't serve both God and money. Riches and good character rarely go together. But they did in Boaz. Some people are both wealthy and good, but not many.

If you have money, be careful not to set your heart on it or love it. If you have money, be careful not to allow it to become an idol. Use your resources for the glory of God and for the good of others. Strive to be like Boaz, both rich and righteous.

C. Boaz sets a good example for us to follow, especially in his relationship with other people. It would be good for us to follow Boaz's example and imitate his character.

³ F. B. Huey Jr., "Ruth," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 526.

Notice several good characteristics evident in Boaz:

1. .4 He's a good boss/employer.
 - a) Boaz seems to have a good relationship with his workers. He treats his workers with respect and kindness. He speaks to them kindly.
 - b) .4 This greeting is a typical Israelite greeting—"the Lord be with you." The fact that Boaz uses this kind of language suggests that he is a godly man.
 - c) We find out later that he's set up a breakroom for his workers, he has water for them, and he even provides lunch for them out in the field. So Boaz is a good man to work for.
2. .5-6 He's observant
 - a) He notices right away that an unfamiliar girl is working out in his field. It's rather remarkable that he notices one extra female worker. There are several other female workers in the field. Ruth easily could have blended in and gone without notice.
 - b) .5 But Boaz does notice, and he asks, "Whose damsel is this?" That seems kind of a funny question to us. But in Jewish culture, all women would have belonged to someone else. Married women would belong to their husband. Single women would belong to their father. Slaves would belong to their owners. Women were simply not independent; they all belonged in some way to a man. So Boaz wants to know what man is associated with this unknown woman.
 - c) .6 The overseer/foreman tells Boaz that this woman came back from Moab with Naomi. He either doesn't know her name or doesn't think it's important enough to tell Boaz. By all accounts, this is an insignificant woman, a foreigner who doesn't need to be named.
3. .8-9 He's compassionate and considerate
 - a) He calls Ruth "my daughter," a term of endearment and kindness. From the very beginning of this interaction, he treats Ruth with dignity and respect.

- b) This language also suggests that Boaz is older than Ruth. If they were the same age, it seems unlikely that he'd call her "my daughter." By calling her that, Boaz is in a sense offering to protect her like a father would protect his daughter.
- c) He tells her to continue to glean in his fields and to stay with his workers.
- d) .9b he's told the young men not to bother her. This is important because Ruth was not under the protection of any man. It also implies that field work was potentially dangerous for an unattached woman. Boaz provides that protection when he tells his workers not to mistreat or harass Ruth.
- e) .9b Boaz authorizes Ruth to get a drink of water whenever she needs one.

4. .10 He's gracious and interested.

- a) Ruth replies very humbly to Boaz. It might seem rather odd to us today, but bowing before a person of high position was common in that culture. It was a gesture of submission and gratitude.

Bowing down to the ground shows that Ruth recognizes her humble position. She's a very lowly foreign woman, and Boaz is a man of great power, wealth, and stature. The two of them are at the opposite ends of the social ladder.

- b) Ruth is quite amazed that she has found favor/grace in the eyes of this great man who doesn't even know her. She affirms that she is a stranger, i.e., a foreigner. It would be totally reasonable for a man like Boaz to ignore Ruth.
- c) It's a testament to Boaz's good nature and character that he shows such gracious good will toward Ruth. The fact that he treats a poor, foreign, female in this way reveals Boaz to be a good man.

Quote: Boaz had dignified this destitute widow from a foreign land and treated her as a significant person, Ruth, who is obviously extremely self-conscious about her [status as a foreigner], cannot believe Boaz's indifference to the fact that she is a Moabite.⁴

5. .11-13 He's appreciative and kind

- a) .11 Boaz now explains why he's being so kind and considerate to Ruth. He's heard all about Ruth, how she left her home and family to take care of Naomi. This is the woman everyone in Bethlehem has been talking about!

Boaz knows that Ruth is a Moabitess. The Moabites are long-standing enemies of Israel. They are foreigners who worship false gods. Yet none of that seems to matter to him at all. Ruth has proven herself to be a person of good character by caring for Naomi.

App: How do we respond to foreigners and strangers? When visitors show up at church, how do we react to them? How do we respond to people who don't look like us? Are we considerate, kind, and thoughtful, or do we ignore them? Do we treat people we don't know with dignity and respect? Are we warm and friendly toward outsiders? We should all be as kind and friendly as Boaz was to Ruth.

- b) .12 He confers a blessing on Ruth. He prays that a "full reward" be given to her from God.

Vs. 12 reflects a sense of hope for the future that Ruth could have as a believer in the Lord. She's in poverty right now, and things look rather bleak; but there's a good possibility that the Lord would see her good work and reward her.

⁴ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 661.

App: When you work hard and trust in God, anything is possible. Faithfulness to God combined with hard work and diligence is a recipe for success. When we have good character and work hard, there is no limits on how God might bless us.

- c) .12b He also affirms that Ruth has come to trust in the God of Israel.

The picture he uses to describe God is very moving. The Bible often compares God to a bird and his people to chicks sheltering under its wings (cf. Deut 32:11; Ps 36:7, 57:1, 91:4). It's a beautiful picture of God's care for his people. Ruth has sought refuge under the wings of the God of Israel.

I wonder if you have done the same. How do you find refuge under God's wings? Through faith in Jesus. Jn 14:6

- d) .13 Ruth expresses her thanks for Boaz's kindness toward her. Boaz has made her feel comfortable; he's been friendly to her even though she is a foreigner.

The word Ruth uses, "handmaidens," refers to the lowest of female servants, and Ruth says that she is not even of that status. So it's really amazing that a person like Boaz would take notice of such a low status person as herself.

Pr 17:5 *He who mocks the poor reproaches his Maker...*

Rom 12:16 *... Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.*

App: Social status should not matter to us. We should treat all people with dignity and respect as people made in the image of God as fellow believers (if they are).

6. .14-16 He's generous

- a) .14 Boaz invites Ruth to share meals with his workers.

Some of this language is a little unclear in the KJV:

.14c KJV “he reached her parched corn” – Boaz himself passed the grain to her. Roasted grain was a common food in that part of the world. So we see here that Boaz was sitting right next to her or across the table from her, close enough to pass the food to her.

14end “was sufficed, and left.” The sense of this seems to be that she had some food left over. She kept some of the extra food for Naomi. NKJV – *she ate and was satisfied, and kept some back.* I.e., she took a doggy bag home.

What is also unusual about this is that these Jews allowed a Gentile to eat with them. Remember that Ruth would have been considered to be a Gentile. Usually, Jews did not eat meals with Gentiles. But in this case, Boaz didn’t seem to be concerned about that. He was friendly, compassionate, and generous toward this outsider. He intentionally invites this Gentile to eat at the same table with Jews.

App: The NT affirms that in the church age, ethnic differences don’t matter when it comes to our relationship to God. Salvation does not depend on your family background, ancestry, or ethnicity. Everyone is equal before God. And we should treat all ethnicities the same. “Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight.”

There is so much emphasis in the culture today on race. In the church, there should be virtually no emphasis on race.

- b) .15 After the meal, Ruth got up to go back to the fields and continue gleaning. Boaz commanded his workers to allow her to glean among the sheaves and not to bother her.

Typically, gleaners would go out into the fields *after* the harvesters are done with their work. But Boaz makes special accommodation for Ruth to glean while the harvesters are still working.

- c) Boaz tells his workers not to “reproach” her (vs. 15) or “rebuke her” (vs. 16), he’s warning them to leave her alone. Boaz is protecting Ruth from potential abuse or mistreatment.

App: A clear biblical principle is that those in power should use their influence to protect the weak and vulnerable. If you have a position of influence or power, use it to protect the weak. Use your position to prevent mistreatment and abuse. Perhaps God has given you that position so that you can protect and help others.

- d) .16 Boaz also commanded his workers to leave extra behind for Ruth. They should pull some grain out of the stacks and leave it for her to pick up easily.

Quote: Boaz’s instructions were generous beyond the requirements of the law that allowed the gleaners in the fields only after the reapers had finished their work. His actions showed that he already had a special interest in Ruth.⁵

What’s happened here is what we often see in romantic stories, boy meets girl. It seems that Boaz finds Ruth quite attractive; he’s obviously interested in her. What will happen next? Tune in next time for another exciting installment of this intriguing story.

Both Ruth and Boaz show their good character in this passage. Ruth is a diligent worker who takes the initiative and finds a way to get some food for herself and for Naomi. Boaz arrives on the scene and reveals many good personal characteristics.

Most importantly, God shows his providential care for his people. He provides for these two widow women through Ruth’s hard work and through Boaz’s generosity. We see how God uses people and their choices to provide for them.

Both Ruth and Boaz are good examples for us to follow. Ruth is a diligent self-starter who is willing to work. Boaz is kind, compassionate, friendly, and generous. Although he’s a man of substance and stature, he’s a nice man and a good man. He’s a godly man who cares about others, especially those who are weak and vulnerable. All of us should follow these examples and develop the same character.

⁵ F. B. Huey Jr., “Ruth,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 531.

This passage shows us that God is working behind the scenes to provide for his people. Even seemingly random, chance occurrences are part of God's providential care for us. Those who have come to trust under the shadow of God's wing can have hope for the future. We must trust in the Lord to guide us to our place of work and to the people we need to know.