

Ruth 2:17-23 Ruth's Report

In this passage in the book of Ruth, we find Ruth returning home after a day of gleaning in Boaz's field and giving Naomi a report about what had happened. The most important thing Naomi learns in this conversation is that Ruth gleaned in a field belonging to Boaz. That fact has major implications for the rest of the story.

As we look at this passage, we have to admit that there are not many deep, spiritual principles here for us to apply to ourselves. We don't glean in fields today. There is no particular spiritual significance associated with gleaning barley. This passage is not much more than a report of what happened to Ruth. None of this pertains to us directly; there are very few spiritual things for us to think about here. But as we look at the details, we'll find a few timeless principles that we can consider.

Remember that the theme of the book is how God demonstrates His faithfulness by loving, superintending, and caring for His people. Chapter 2 shows how God is providing for Ruth and Naomi. We'll look at two particular words that describe how God loves and cares for his people. And as God has provided for the characters in this passage, we have confidence that God will provide for us as well.

Let's look at Ruth's report of her experience gleaning in Boaz's field.

I. The time of the gleaning .17a

- A. Ruth was working in the field all day, not finishing until evening. Normally, field workers worked from sun up until sun down. Ruth was out there working virtually all day.
- B. That fact confirms that Ruth was a diligent worker. No one was forcing her to work all day; she could have quit whenever she wanted to. I imagine she wanted to collect as much as possible, so she continued working throughout the day.

App: One of the characteristics of a successful person is willingness to work. Success or failure in life often depends on your work ethic.

Those who are willing to work generally do better in life than those who are not.

II. The amount of the gleaning .17b-18

- A. Ruth gleaned “about an ephah of barley.” That’s what it amounted to after she had beaten it out, that is winnowed/threshed it to remove the husks and stalks from the grain.
- B. How much is an ephah?
 - 1. An ephah is a measurement of dry goods, especially grain and flour. It’s impossible to be precise about how much an ephah would be because different cultures used different measurements.
 - 2. An ephah was a substantial amount, between 30-50 pounds. From other literature we learn that an ephah of grain could provide a meal for 50 men. So this was a lot of barley, far more than you would expect one person to glean during one day’s work.
 - 3. But remember that Boaz had told his workers to make it easy for Ruth to glean, and she made the most of this opportunity.
- C. What does it say about Ruth that she could carry that much barley home from the field? She must have been a substantial woman.
- D. Having so much barley meant that Ruth and Naomi could eat some of it and sell some of it. So this gleaning provided for much more than just food for a day or two.

App: God provided abundantly for Ruth and Naomi through Ruth’s work. Most of us enjoy an abundance of food and material, and we should be thankful to God for that. None of us is starving; many of us have the opposite problem—we have too much food. The appropriate response to God’s abundant blessing is thanksgiving.

III. The place of the gleaning .19

- A. After seeing such a large amount of grain, Naomi naturally wondered where Ruth had been working. This was an amazing result.

- B. Even before she found out where Ruth had worked, Naomi conferred a blessing upon the one who allowed Ruth to glean in his field.
 - C. Naomi learns that Ruth had been gleaning in Boaz's field.
- IV. The blessing of the gleaning .20
- A. Naomi utters another blessing, this time affirming that God had not "left off his kindness to the living and to the dead."
 - 1. The living, of course, are Naomi and Ruth.
 - 2. The dead would be Naomi's and Ruth's dead husbands. God is showing his kindness even to the dead by taking care of their widows.
 - B. As part of this blessing, Naomi uses a very important biblical word: *hesed*, translated as "kindness" here. The idea of God's kindness is one of the key theological teachings of the book. So it's appropriate for us to get a better understanding of the word and what it means.¹
 - 1. The basic meaning of the word *hesed* is lovingkindness or compassion. It's often translated as steadfast love or mercy. Some scholars describe it as God's covenant-keeping love.

5 times in the OT, we find language expressing the fact that God keeps covenant and mercy/*hesed* to his people.

Quote: [The word *hesed*] wraps up in itself an entire cluster of concepts—love, mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, benevolence, loyalty, and covenant faithfulness.²

About 70% of the time the word is used, it refers to God's mercy or lovingkindness toward his people. Interestingly, there appears to be no example of *hesed* describing human love for God. The word describes God's love/mercy for us and our love/mercy toward others, but not our love for God.

¹ Some of this taken from David Booth's word study on *hesed*.

² Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 673.

That may be because the word often refers to love/kindness/mercy for those who don't deserve it or toward equals. And of course, God does deserve our love, and he is not our equal; he's far superior to us. Most often, the word describes God's love for his people.

The OT shows many occasions in which God extended his mercy and kindness to his people. As one commentator writes, "The entire history of the dealings of Yahweh with Israel can be summed up as *hesed*; it is the dominating motive which appears in His deeds and the motive which gives unity and intelligibility to all His dealings with men."³

Deuteronomy 7:9 is one of the most important passages that describe this relationship. Here the people are reminded of God's commitment to them as it states, "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and **mercy** (*hesed*) with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations" (KJV).

The NT tells us that "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8, 16). That's one of his primary characteristics. It's because of his great love and mercy that he saves those who repent and believe. Cf. Titus 3:5.

The Bible often emphasizes showing *hesed* to the undeserving. In 2 Samuel 9:1, David asks if there is "any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may shew him kindness (*hesed*) for Jonathan's sake." We extend this kind of compassion and kindness to those who cannot repay us.

That fits very well with 1 John 4:11 *Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

The same kind of love, kindness, mercy, and grace that God extends toward us we are to extend toward others.

³ John McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Touchstone, 1965), 566.

Ephesians 4:32 *And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.*

In light of God’s mercy toward us, we must be merciful, kind, and gracious toward others.

2. .20b It’s interesting the Naomi asserts that God has not “left off” or abandoned his kindness/*hesed* to her family. Previously (1:20-21), Naomi said that God had dealt very bitterly with her and afflicted her. But now she says that God has not abandoned his lovingkindness and grace toward her. The abundance of grain that Ruth gleaned is an example of how God will provide for them. This is a sign of God’s care and concern.

App: Christians can be assured that God has not left off his kindness/*hesed* to us. Even if we experience great tragedy and loss, we can be assured of God’s love. Cf. Rom 8:35-39.

- C. .20end Naomi uses another important word: *next/near kinsman*—*goel* in Hebrew.

1. One writer notes that the word *goel* denotes the near relative who is responsible for the economic well-being of a relative, and he comes into play especially when a relative is in distress and cannot get himself/herself out of the crisis.⁴

So the *goel* is that family member that fixes things for the rest of the family.

2. The *goel*/near kinsman had several responsibilities⁵:
 - a) to ensure that the hereditary property of the clan never passes out of the clan (Lev 25:25–30);
 - b) to buy back those who have sold themselves into slavery because of poverty (Lev 25:47–55);

⁴ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 674.

⁵ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 674.

BTW, indentured servitude was a means of providing for your family when in a crisis. If a person could not provide for himself or his family, he could become a servant to someone who would agree to provide for his needs. This was a form of slavery/servitude that actually was a good alternative to poverty and starvation.

If a person had sold himself or his family into indentured servitude, the *goel* could redeem/buy back that person by paying his debt.

- c) to track down and execute murderers of near relatives (Num 35:12, 19–27);
- d) to receive restitution money on behalf of a deceased victim of a crime (Num 5:8); and
- e) to ensure that justice is served in a lawsuit involving a relative (Job 19:25; Ps 119:154; Jer 50:34).
- f) In addition to all of that, the book of Ruth shows us that the *goel* was also responsible marry a widow whose husband died without producing any children. This is the practice of levirate marriage. The dead man's close relative (*levir*) should marry his widow and produce children in the name of the dead man.

So in the book of Ruth, the kinsman redeemer also functions as the brother-in-law.

App: I think it's rather unfortunate that we have lost many of these close family ties that were so important to the ancient Jews. Family relationships were very important back then. Family members upheld strong obligations to one another. If one member of the family were suffering, the other family members would rally around in support. Keeping the family line going was so important that widows who had no children were given the opportunity to have them. Families felt a deep obligation to those who were part of the family.

One of the great disasters of our modern age is the breakup of the family. Many people today don't bother to get married, and many children grow up in dysfunctional homes. The government promotes and supports family dysfunction. Many people today have almost no family ties, and that is a great shame and a tragedy. The country is only as strong as the families of that country, and many American families are deeply troubled.

As Christians, we should work to promote and strengthen family ties. We should fulfill our obligations to the members of our extended family. We should try to keep the family unit intact.

And maybe some of us could serve as a kind of modern day *goel*. We could be the family fixer, the one who takes responsibility for others in the family that have fallen on hard times. We can try to keep the family together and functioning properly. Maybe some of us could serve in that role.

- V. The future of the gleaning .21-22
 - A. Ruth further reports that Boaz had invited her to continue gleaning right alongside his workers until the end of the harvest.
 - B. Naomi responds that this is a good thing.
 - C. The last part of vs. 22 is a little unclear in our version. The sense of the words "that they meet thee not in any other field" seems to mean something like "lest you be assaulted in another field," or "lest others mistreat you in another field." She's talking about the threat of ill-treatment or abuse that could occur out in the fields. In other words, Naomi recognized that Ruth would be safe with Boaz and his workers, but perhaps not safe in another field.

App: Does the workplace still present a threat to women? Women in particular are susceptible to mistreatment and abuse at work. E.g., the “Me Too” movement was in large part a response to the abuse women were encountering in the workplace. Every situation is different, but it’s still true that women must be very careful when working with men. Some men will take advantage of a woman if they get a chance. Women in the workplace should not be ignorant or gullible regarding potential threats against them. Having a protective boss and a safe workplace is always a blessing.

- VI. The summary of the gleaning .23
- A. Ruth worked alongside Boaz’s workers in his fields throughout the barley and wheat harvest. So she was out there working for up to three months—March/April until June. She obviously feels comfortable working with Boaz’s workers. They don’t bother her or threaten her.
 - B. Because of Ruth’s work, she and Naomi made ends meet; they got along; they had enough food and a place to live. This was the way that God was providing for them.
 - C. It seems unlikely that Ruth gleaned a whole ephah of grain every day. But she no doubt gleaned more than they needed, and perhaps she sold the extra amount to buy other necessities.
 - D. .23end Ruth and Naomi lived together. They had settled into a routine. Naomi and Ruth took care of themselves during this time because of Ruth’s field work.
 - E. The author doesn’t tell us what Boaz was doing during these weeks of harvest. Was he out there regularly checking on Ruth? Did he continue to pay special attention to her? Is their relationship developing? We simply don’t know.
 - F. But we do know that in the next chapter, Naomi decides to play match maker. Maybe she feels that Boaz is moving too slowly or that he needs a little encouragement to pursue Ruth. We’ll find out more about that next time.

As we finish our study of this passage, we should return our focus to one of the attributes of God that Naomi mentions. God had not forsaken his *hesed*, his lovingkindness, grace, and mercy to Naomi and Ruth.

God has not forsaken his grace and mercy toward us, either. If we are living like Ruth, in faithfulness toward God and kindness toward one another, we can expect God to provide graciously for us.

And perhaps some of us could play the role of the *goel*, providing support and solutions for family members in crisis. Maybe some of us should pay more attention to the needs of our extended families and provide help and resources.

Next time your wife or husband asks you how your day went, or when someone asks, “How are you?” try this reply: “God hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead.” That response might be a good conversation starter.