

# Ruth | Tenderness in the Midst of Brutality

## “Initial Encounter (A Great Man from Bethlehem)”

Ruth CH 2

12.8.19

*Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. <sup>2</sup> And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." <sup>3</sup> So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. <sup>4</sup> Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, "May the LORD be with you." And they said to him, "May the LORD bless you." <sup>5</sup> Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" <sup>6</sup> The servant in charge of the reapers replied, "She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab. <sup>7</sup> "And she said, 'Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.' Thus she came and has remained from the morning until now; she has been sitting in the house for a little while."*

*<sup>8</sup> Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. <sup>9</sup> "Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw." <sup>10</sup> Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" <sup>11</sup> Boaz replied to her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. <sup>12</sup> "May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge." <sup>13</sup> Then she said, "I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants."*

*<sup>14</sup> At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar." So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left. <sup>15</sup> When she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. <sup>16</sup> "Also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her."*

*<sup>17</sup> So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. <sup>18</sup> She took it up and went into the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also took it out and gave Naomi what she had left after she was satisfied. <sup>19</sup> Her mother-in-law then said to her, "Where did you glean today and where did you work? May he who took notice of you be blessed." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." <sup>20</sup> 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."*

*Again Naomi said to her, "The man is our relative, he is one of our closest relatives." <sup>21</sup> Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "Furthermore, he said to me, 'You should stay close to my servants until they have finished all my harvest.'" <sup>22</sup> Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his maids, so that others do not fall upon you in another field." <sup>23</sup> So she stayed close by the maids of Boaz in order to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. And she lived with her mother-in-law.*

**Last week, began our Advent Series** – Advent means coming or arrival and this is a season used by many Christians to prepare to celebrate the arrival of God in the birth of Jesus Christ.

This year we're using the Book of Ruth to help us prepare. About 1000BC, an Israelite family (a couple and two sons) left Bethlehem and settled in Moab, where their sons married Moabite women and then the father and sons died. Naomi's in trouble!

Last week, Naomi the widow and her Moabitess (yuck!) daughter-in-law also a widow, named Ruth have returned from Moab to Bethlehem. Naomi asked to be called "Mara" meaning "Bitter" because Almighty God had given her such a bitter lot. She left FULL but returned EMPTY (bereft of her husband and sons) Almighty God could have stopped it but He didn't.

In her pain and grief, she lost sight of the fact that God is NOT only Almighty but good. Unbeknownst to her, HE was about to bring tenderness into her life...and would use this foreigner, her daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabitess as an agent of tenderness.

Last week, Naomi ("pleasant") was embittered – and this week something happens that makes a great change in her... The chapter begins with Naomi passive and depressed and lethargic but somehow by the end...she's a bit different.

Today, I want us to think about God's heart for the needy, the grieving, widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor AND I want us to think about two ways God shows His heart for these categories of people and then finally how, when we see these two ways (that God expresses His heart) it changes us:

- #1) Poverty
- #2) Provision/Providence
- #3) Praise

Throughout the Bible God shows that He has a special concern for the needy. He will so identify Himself with those in poverty that the Proverbs say, "He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker, but he who is gracious to the needy honors Him." (14.31) and "He who mocks the poor taunts his Maker" (17.5)

These categories of God's concern are repeated throughout the Hebrew Bible: the elderly, the sick, the widowed, the oppressed, orphans, immigrants and the materially poor. The "Last/Least/Lost."

And when we come to the New Testament, that concern carries over. God Himself comes in the Person of Jesus Christ and the opening words of His inaugural ADDRESS (the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5) are, "Blessed are the POOR in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" and, because Jesus often repeated His teachings, Luke's version reads, "Blessed are the POOR..." And one of the final teachings of Jesus Christ, Matthew 25 (Parable of the Sheep and Goats) ends in the famous line, "to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me." (v.45) From start to finish, in words and deeds, Jesus Christ expresses the Heart of God for the needy.

It's repeated in Acts CH 6 when some widows in the earliest Christian church were overlooked – it all stops until the poor widows and the minority members of the church were served.

And now come Naomi and Ruth out of pagan Moab and back into Bethlehem... both widows, both poor, and Ruth an immigrant...and what will they find of GOD'S HEART FOR THESE classes of people (LEAST/LOST/LAST)?

Well, as it turns out, while Israel as a whole is without a king and every man doing whatever they want, but in Bethlehem, there's at least one man who is living in covenant with God.

This man, named Boaz, will be used BY GOD to express God's concern for those in NEED. In Boaz God will demonstrate His heart in two ways: provision and providence.

I know those words are used interchangeably but they're not synonymous. Providence is God's work of governing the universe – all His creatures and all their actions. I know it has the word, "PROVIDE-" in it but the word providence is more about the Invisible Hand that moves and sustains all things at God's will.

We'll get to PROVIDENCE in a moment but first there are specific provisions in God's Law for Israel that would express in very tangible and earthy ways God's heart for the weak/needy.

This whole book is a very earthy, agrarian and organic kind of story. As you see it's so much about food-production, farming, work, sweat and hunger and harvest.

And God is NOT going to leave His great heart for the needy in spiritual platitudes and ideals; instead, he will give very earthy, practical ways for His people to actually CARE for folks in these categories. In Leviticus (19.9, 23.22) and Deuteronomy (24.19) He will require that harvesters leave the edges of a field or vineyard or orchard UNHARVESTED so the poor can provide for themselves.

And that's what we're reading here – Ruth must have heard of that practice in Israel (based in God's Law) and thus she asks her Israelite mother-in-law, "Should I go find someone's field – someone who obeyed the Law to glean?"

God expressed His desire to care for the needy in this very down-to-earth, practical way.

And secondly, there is a provision in the Law for widows. A so-called "kinsman redeemer" (Deut 25.5-10) – a brother or close relative of a young widow would be required to marry her and parent children with her so that she would retain property rights and the family line would continue. That might sound weird to us but in the ancient world, a woman was very vulnerable. You see it in today's passage in the repeated concern for Ruth that no one touch her or harm her. And as a woman's retirement and her protection in old age would come from her sons – this wasn't weird to them – it was crucial!

Here again, God is not content with theory or lofty ideals – He wants His people to actually care for the vulnerable. And here in Bethlehem, the House of Bread, it's happening.

There's a man living in covenant with God – not doing "what's right in his own eyes" but actually listening to God's Law and so providing for the poor, the immigrant, the stranger.

And in recording that Ruth went out...and, middle of verse 3, "she happened to come to the field belonging to Boaz" we see the Invisible Hand of God, the providence or secret governing of God. The writer is toying with us! It's a very deliberate rhetorical device that looks like chance – but it really emphasizes that Ruth had nothing to do with this. On her part there was no intentionality but God is secretly working behind the scenes to express His heart for the vulnerable. God is hiding (Isa 45.15) but He's actually preserving and governing.

And I think you can look back on your life and see how some seemingly inconsequential move or decision you made... maybe with no real forethought or premeditation led to great changes in you...

I love this quote from *Great Expectations*: "Pause you who read this, and think for the moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day." (CH 9).

You know the butterfly effect... it could be as simple as a decision to go through a yellow light or to slam on the breaks... I think of my own life. In undergrad I had the opportunity to take NT Greek but the professor routinely started the year with 40 students and ended with 8 (everyone else dropped out or failed) and I'm not gifted linguistically so I opted out.

When I reported for the new school year, that professor had unexpectedly moved to Alaska! And the new professor was exceedingly patient and amazingly gifted at explaining linguistic concepts and grammar. So I passed...and that enabled me to take advanced Greek studies in grad-school taught by a guy named Paul Fowler who left after my first year to move to Hollywood Florida to pastor this church! When I graduated, I asked him for a job...and the rest is history!

In other words, if Professor Glandon changed the channel and never watched that show on how beautiful Alaska was... We never would have come to this church! We never would have adopted our kids... and Owen would never have been born.

For Ruth it was, “stop at this field or that?...Ah, I may as well stop here!”

And think about it...she meets this man, Boaz. He turns out to BE that kinsman (apparently a very distant relative of Elimelech’s) and on and on!

This chapter is made up mostly of dialogue. You’ll notice the repetition of the word, “said” (20x!). There are FIVE conversations but they’re arranged VERY deliberately to point to the middle and longest, i.e. vv. 8-14, the dialogue between Boaz and Ruth – all because she went left instead of right...chose this field not that!

And all of a sudden... love is in the air!

He’s apparently attracted to her. She’s apparently very impressed by his kindness and grace. He has asked about her and heard about her love for her mother-in-law... She can’t believe that he, an Israelite, would care for a Moabitess...

But HE knows that God cares for immigrants and he expresses God’s heart to her in these lovely words (12), “May YHWH reward your work, and your wages be full from YHWH, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.”

And you know the same providence, the holy, wise and powerful Hand of God that moved Dr. Glandon to Alaska AND determined that this one time you would NOT go through that yellow light...which meant that you were at a different place in the line (at Starbucks) and happened to be next to that woman who happened to introduce you to a friend whom you later married... The same God who orchestrates a billion-trillion contingencies every second on this terrestrial ball is also the God who ARRIVED – He made His advent in Jesus Christ in what St Paul calls, “the fullness of time” (Gal 4.4).

He orchestrated everything that has ever come to pass – the apparently beautiful things (like this budding love story) and the apparently hideous things – so that even out of the worst of it –

even out of the rejection of His Beloved Son – out of those ashes came beauty and care for the NEEDY, the materially poor and (like me) the morally, spiritually poor and guilty.

And when Naomi saw this...that the Almightyness of God is JOINED to the goodness of God...it changes her. She begins this chapter, still bitter and when Ruth says, “Mom...I was thinking of venturing out and trying that gleaning-thing you told me is written in the Law of your God...uh...OUR God...what d’ya think?”

Naomi answers with two words, “go daughter” – as if she’s so depressed she can’t put together a sentence... But in the end, when she sees that the provisions of the Law (that really do WORK to show God’s heart for the vulnerable) and then she sees the Invisible Hand at work to somehow connect Boaz and Ruth and now, “look! Ruth is carrying 25 pounds of grain and maybe...love is in the air!”

When she sees the heart of God, she bursts out in praise v. 20 “May Boaz be blessed of YHWH who has not withdrawn his kindness (HESED) to the living and the dead.”

She goes from bitter to blessing. She comes alive!

And this really is it. It’s the motive of the Christian Life that God has provided for me and that the Invisible Hand became visible for me, He arrived...there was the Advent (the arrival)...and that Hand that rules and governs all things was pierced for me. Not because I deserved it but to DECLARE me deserving.

This sense (that God has cared for needy ME) it changes bitterness and lethargy into blessing and praise. You see it in all three characters (Ruth, Boaz and Naomi) all express in their ways that they have encountered the goodness of God and it fills their mouths with praise.