

Would You Believe It?

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[0 : 00] We're going to read together from the Old Testament, Ruth chapter 2, and this is God's holy word. Now, Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him, and whose sight I shall find favor. And she said to her, go, my daughter. So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers. And she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech. And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, the Lord be with you. And they answered, the Lord bless you. Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, whose young woman is this? And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, she is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab.

She said, please, 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.

Then Boaz said to Ruth, now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. 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. 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?

[1 : 38] 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. 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.

Then she said, I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants. And at mealtime, Boaz said to her, come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.

And 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. When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men saying, let her glean even among the sheaves and do not reproach her and also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean and do not rebuke her. So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned and it was about an ephah of barley 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. 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 work today is Boaz. And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, may he be blessed by the Lord whose kindness 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. 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. 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. So she kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law. This is God's holy word. I don't know if you have ever been in that horrible situation when you go to an event or maybe a work

meeting, team building exercise, and they say, we're going to go around the room and we're all going to talk a little bit about ourselves. It's the most awkward situation you can possibly find yourself in. And when we got to the end of Ruth one, and we look at how Naomi's life has played out so far, if Naomi was in that situation and she's sitting in the circle in the chair, when it gets to her, she's probably got two words that she's going to say that sum up who she is and what she is. She's going to say bitter and she's going to say empty. She came, her name, Naomi, means pleasant, but she renames herself Mara, which means bitter because she says, God has dealt bitterly with me. And you'll remember maybe from last week, Naomi, her husband and her two sons traveled out of the land that God had promised to his people, to a strange country. And there her husband and her sons died. And Naomi has come back home alone.

[4 : 49] And she's left destitute. She has nowhere to turn. She went out full, she says, and I've come home empty, bitter and empty. That's where Naomi is. She's hit rock bottom. She's nothing left. How could any good at all come out of my situation? But as readers, when we read the book of Ruth, we're given clues that brighter days might just lie ahead. The writer tells us that when Ruth and Naomi arrived in Bethlehem, it was right at the beginning of barley harvest. The barley is the first grain to be harvested. So since they've arrived right at the beginning of barley harvest, there's going to be food now. There's going to be more good stuff to come in the future. As readers, we see that.

Naomi doesn't see it. She's in despair. And so when we pick up again now in chapter two, we see that she doesn't even have the energy to go and get food yet. What we're going to see in Ruth chapter two is that because God is faithful to those who he loves, he's constantly working through his people for his people. Naomi looks ahead and sees only darkness. But by the end of this chapter, hope has been begun to break through. God provides for her daily needs. He's already preparing a future blessing that's going to move Naomi from her emptiness to fullness. And so the big lesson for us tonight is that no matter the circumstances you're in, no matter the hurt that you feel, the pain that you've caused or whatever it is that prevents you from seeing a bright, hopeful future, God provides for those who take refuge in him. When I came in today, somebody opened the bulletin and said, oh, that's a big reading, a big passage. It is a big passage, 22 verses. So what we're going to do is we're going to go through it in stages, three different stages. And the first stage we're going to look at is Ruth trusts God's provision. So Naomi and Ruth have arrived in Bethlehem and it's the beginning of the first harvest. Great news because previously there was famine, but bad news because Okado doesn't deliver to Bethlehem. And so if Ruth and Naomi are going to eat, they're going to have to go and get food for themselves. Ruth, who you'll notice throughout the reading is referred to as the Moabite, marking her out to us as an outsider, the one who doesn't belong here. She's the one who asked Naomi for her blessing to go and get food for them both. You'll remember as well, maybe that the book of Ruth begins with the line, it was in the time of the judges, the time of the judges ruled. And if you know anything about the book of judges, you know that shorthand for chaos and lawlessness and disorder, turbulent and dangerous, couldn't be more dangerous for a young woman on her own wandering into fields looking for some food. So Ruth shows real bravery because she knows what could happen to her.

Naomi, on the other hand, well, Naomi seems paralyzed by grief. I think sometimes we picture Naomi, maybe we've seen drawings of her in children's books as a decrepit old lady who can hardly move, so we could hardly blame her for not leaving the house. Of course, Ruth would have to go and get food for her. But actually, if we think about the fact that she probably had her children in her teens and the boys weren't married when they were left, so they would have been young men, probably teenagers as well. And then they were in Moab for only 10 years. So when she comes back from Moab to Bethlehem, Naomi's probably 40, 50 years old. It's all the way through the passage, we've not had any hint that she's hindered physically. In fact, she's just traveled from Moab to Bethlehem, probably on foot.

She's got to have a pretty good level of physical fitness in order to do that. So when Ruth says to Naomi, will I go and get food? It's not because Naomi can't, not physically at least. So Ruth goes to Naomi and says, I'll go get food. And Naomi says, okay, go, on you go. She doesn't say, I'll come with you.

[9 : 07] After all, you came with me all the way from Moab to Bethlehem. Or she doesn't even say, be careful. Remember, it's the time of the judges. She says, just go. But Ruth can go alone into the fields, not sure where she's going to end up because she trusts Yahweh. She trusts the God of Israel.

And you see that God has built laws into the life of Israel. So in the Old Testament early books, in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, we see how God has taken care of people who are sojourners, people traveling through the land, widows and orphans and the poor. God's providing for these people all the time. In Leviticus, people, God tells people that they're not to harvest their fields all the way to the edges. They're to leave some at the side for people to come after them who don't have anything so that they can eat. And then in Deuteronomy, God says to the people, if you're harvesting a field and you drop some grain, you drop some sheaves, you're not allowed to turn back and pick them up. Leave them for the people who are coming after you. So God's making provision for all kinds of people, sojourners, the fatherless, the widow. They're just some of the people that are referenced in the Old Testament. What we see in Ruth's actions is someone who's arrived as a stranger in Bethlehem, but who's very quickly adapted to the customs and traditions of God's people. But even more than that, we see a foreigner, an outsider, putting their trust in Yahweh, the God of Israel, to deliver for her more than somebody who was born and raised into that tradition. So Ruth goes to work. And then in verse 3, we see some pretty loaded words in this sentence. It says, so she set out and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz. When we read that in English, it's really easy for us to skim over it, but it literally says something like, her chance chanced upon. I love the phrasing in the old King James Bible. It says, and her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging to Boaz.

[11 : 29] What does that mean? Well, we might interpret it today as something like, and wouldn't you know it, as luck would have it? Would you believe it? She's just gone and ended up in Boaz's field.

If this was a film adaptation that we were watching, the narrator would kind of look to the side of the camera and he'd raise his eyebrows like that, as if to say, you guys know what's going on here. What an incredible coincidence, except we know it's not coincidence at all. This is God's providence at work. Providence is not fate. It's not blind luck. It's not the cold machinery of an impersonal universe.

Providence is wise, loving, and personal. It's the rule of God over all things. God's governing ordinary events for the good of his people and the glory of his own name.

Ruth thinks that she's looking for grain. She is looking for grain, but God's leading her towards redemption. Do you feel today the way that Naomi has at the start of our chapter?

No matter what you're going through today, how hard it feels. If you're convinced that the hand of the Lord has gone out against you, like Naomi said, that the Almighty's dealt bitterly with you, this chapter forces us to look again, to look at the ordinary texture of our lives, the ups and downs, at the people God's put into our path, the doors that God has left ajar for us to walk through. And we have to ask ourselves, is the Lord's faithful chesed love at work in ways that we just haven't seen yet?

[13 : 20] Okay, so the second section we're going to look at together is Boaz shows obedience to God. So before Ruth took us into the field as she gathers grain, the narrator drops a name in verse one, and the name's Boaz. He's introduced as a gibber hiel, a man of great worth, standing and substance.

And he's from the clan of Elimelech, Naomi's late husband. And he is, as we discover later, a kinsman redeemer. We'll come back to that in a little while. And the narrator tells us about Boaz before Ruth even arrives in the field. And this is God's way of saying, before you even know what you need, I'm already preparing the answer for you. The provision of God is not reactive.

He doesn't scramble when his people are in need and look for a solution. Boaz was already in place. He was already there in position, part of God's plan. The first part of this chapter shows us that God's invisible hand of providence is at work. The second section shows us the highly visible kindness of God as it works through his people. So Boaz's name can be rendered in him as strength, and Boaz lives up to his name. But we know that in the Bible, strength is not brute force. Strength protects the weak. It uses its power for the good of others. True strength reflects the character of God. Up until now, Ruth has been identified by the things that make her an outsider, Ruth the Moabite.

She's a foreigner, a widow, the poor woman gleaning behind the harvesters. And in the eyes of society, she's almost invisible. But Boaz sees her. And more importantly, God sees her.

[15 : 29] One of the greatest comforts that we have in Scripture is that God sees the people that society overlooks. Boaz sees Ruth, and he provides three peas for her. He gives her permission. She's allowed to stay close to his workers as she gathers food in the field. He gives her protection. Boaz says, I've told my men not to touch you. Remember, we're in the time of the judges when everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. Ruth's a foreign widow. She's a prime target for anyone wanting to do harm. But Boaz offers her protection. And then the third P that Boaz offers to Ruth is provision.

So she's not only allowed to work in his field. In verse 15, he tells his reapers to deliberately drop bundles for her way more than is demanded of him in the law. And culturally significant, in a culture where eating together was really significant, Boaz invites Ruth to come and eat at his own table at lunchtime. And Ruth reacts maybe in the way that we would all react. She collapses at his feet. And she says to him, what have I done to deserve this? So Ruth's completely overwhelmed by the grace that Boaz offers to her. And if we think about all that she's been through, that's not surprising. She's lost her husband. She's left her people, her religion, her traditions.

She's traveled for miles in danger with her mother-in-law. Since she's left her own country, she's been practically invisible to everyone. Nobody's taken notice of her. And even in Bethlehem, when she arrived with her mother-in-law, her mother-in-law's been quite happy for her to go out into the fields without as much as a take care. But now, probably the most rich and powerful man that she's come across so far, the person with the most means, the highest position, his lavishing kindness on her. It was Yahweh's provision for the poor and the downcast that brought Ruth into the field. But now we see what happens when Yahweh's kindness, his hesed, is extended through his people. And it's important as well, Boaz's response to Ruth. Because he doesn't say to Ruth, well, I saw how hard you were working. So I thought I would give you a hand up. He says, you've left everything to come to the land of the Lord. May the Lord give you a full reward.

It's Ruth's faith in Yahweh, ultimately, that has led to her receiving this blessing from Boaz. And it's Boaz's faith in Yahweh that's allowed him to bless her in this way. So Boaz has noticed Ruth, but we know as Boaz, as readers, because from the first words that he speaks to his workers, he doesn't speak to them just with respect. He speaks to them with Yahweh-centered language. He says, the Lord be with you. And he inspires a Yahweh-centered response from his people who say, the Lord bless you. It's as though the first words that come out of Boaz's mouth are praise of God. And Boaz shows incredible kindness to Ruth, way beyond what Leviticus or Deuteronomy told them that he had to do. And he can do that because he understands that the things that he has stewardship over, his crops, his land, his people, even his reputation, they're all a result of the hesed love that he's been shown by God. Boaz knows that he's a man of authority under someone else's authority.

[19 : 30] He rightfully manages what God has entrusted to him, and he protects the people that God has placed under him because he knows that obedience to Yahweh isn't merely about following the rules to the letter. It's about reflecting the character of the lawgiver. Boaz knows that God is a God of hesed love, faithful, steadfast, loyal, trustworthy love. And so for Boaz to be obedient to God means to be a person who shows faithful, steadfast, loyal, trustworthy love to others. God's generosity provides the foundation, the power, and the pattern for God's people's generosity.

which means that as followers of Jesus tonight, we're forced to ask ourselves, who is the person that God has put directly in your line of vision today?

Who is the person that God has given you the opportunity to show hesed love to? We're tempted, aren't we, I think, to immediately think of the person on the street, the homeless person in the street who doesn't have anything else, people who are invisible to other people.

And that's a good place to look if you want to show steadfast, faithful love to people, definitely. But often, I think, God puts people even more immediately in our path.

Sometimes the people whose need is invisible to everyone else but you. Someone, you've got a unique opportunity to show hesed love to.

[21 : 20] Yes, we look on the streets for how we can help people. Of course we do. But we also look in our friendship groups, in our city groups, in our marriages, in our friendship groups.

Because that might be the very place God is giving us the opportunity to show loyal, lasting, faithful, and yes, sacrificial love to somebody else.

And remember, hesed love is not merely sentimental. It clings like Ruth did to Naomi. It sacrifices and it keeps showing up.

The world understands love as a feeling. But biblical love is covenantal. It says, I will not let you go. Who's God asking you to show hesed love to tonight?

Okay, the third section that we're going to look at together. Finally, God's love heals the brokenhearted. So, at the closing section of this chapter, we begin to see Naomi is changing.

[22 : 28] When Ruth returns home with an ephah of grain, which commentators say is about up to 20 kilograms of grain, which seems an awful lot for her to carry home by herself.

Naomi is shocked. She says, where did you get that from? Who would let you walk out of their field with that much stuff? And Ruth said, well, look, he's also given me a takeaway box for my lunch as well.

The woman who said, I came home early, begins to realize that perhaps she's not, I came home empty, not came home early. I came home empty. Starts to realize that she's maybe not so empty after all.

Because God's hesed love is starting to break into her bitterness. And notice what Naomi says in verse 20. She says, may he be blessed by the Lord whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.

That word kindness is hesed again. It's that faithful, loyal, steadfast love. But whose hesed is it? Does she mean Boaz or does she mean God? Well, as we've seen, it's both.

[23 : 34] God has worked through Boaz and Ruth to provide for Naomi. So even although she believed that God's hesed had abandoned her, now she begins to see God's love had never stopped.

Even in Moab, even in her grief, in her bitterness, even in what she thought was silence. Boaz's hesed love has turned Ruth's life around in the field.

And now Ruth and Boaz's hesed love combined is going to change Naomi's life. And Naomi says something that's loaded with hope.

She says, the man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers. And then for the first time in the book of Ruth, redemption, the concept of redemption enters the conversation really explicitly.

A redeemer is someone who was obliged to buy back his relatives if they fell into debt and had to sell themselves into slavery to repay it. Sometimes the redeemer is also marry a widow and raise up children to continue the name, the family name, and for their heritage.

[24 : 49] Naomi doesn't yet know how far this redeemer is going to go. But the clouds of sadness are beginning to part. There's light at the end of the tunnel. As readers, we've known all along that God's at work in Ruth and Naomi's story.

In chapter one, he provided Naomi with a companion despite her great losses. We saw God provide Bethlehem, the house of bread, with food, with grain after a famine.

And the author has given us background information on Boaz, so we've got a heads up on what's coming next. Would you believe it? Well, yeah, we would believe it because we've seen God's hand at work at every stage.

But then, do we do that in our own lives? Do we believe that God shows us hesed love? Do we truly believe that God's with us in our most difficult circumstances, in our lowest moments, in our deepest pains?

Because the same God who was with Naomi and Ruth is with us. He gives us the most hesed of hesed love. The most determined, faithful, merciful, steadfast love that there is.

[26 : 03] Because God himself entered into our devastation to bring us restoration. Chapter two ends with a seemingly innocuous line.

And it says, and she lived with her mother-in-law. But it's not actually innocuous at all. It's a line that reminds us about seed. Naomi's been emptied of both kinds of seed that are a huge deal in the Bible.

One kind of seed's grain, which provides food, and it's a major indicator of wealth. Well, thanks to God working through Ruth and Boaz, Naomi has grain.

She has food. But there's a second kind of seed that Naomi is still without. And that's offspring. Particularly a son who will carry on the family name, provide for Ruth and Naomi.

And Naomi, as she gets older, take care of her. So while Ruth lives with her mother-in-law, it means she doesn't have a husband. And she doesn't have a son. The anticipation is palpable as we wait to hear what's going to happen to Naomi.

[27 : 09] Look, all the way through this chapter. The field, the bread, the redeemer. The kindness it's shown to the outsider. The seed of the woman.

All this is pointing us beyond the fields. And beyond Boaz to someone greater. To Jesus. Jesus, who is the better Boaz.

The one who provides abundantly for the outsider. Boaz offered Ruth permission to work in his fields. But Jesus welcomes sinners into the kingdom of God.

Boaz protected Ruth from danger. And Jesus offers us protection from the evil one. And he promises that no one can snatch us out of his hand. Boaz fed Ruth with bread from his harvest. Jesus gives us himself the bread of life. Boaz gave Ruth grain that would keep her and Naomi alive for two weeks.

[28 : 11] I don't know. 20 kilograms is quite a lot of grain. Jesus gives us eternal life. And while Boaz showed generosity out of his abundance.

Jesus chose to give us redemption through his poverty. The eternal son of God stepped into our famine. He entered our grief.

Our sin. Our emptiness. And at the cross he took our judgment. So that we can receive his fullness. One more thing that Boaz offered to Ruth.

One more P. In verse 8. Boaz offers Ruth a place. He says work here and don't go anywhere else. Boaz says to Ruth. I know who you are. I know your background. I know the hardship you've been through. I know what you've lost. But don't be troubled anymore.

[29 : 09] You can trust me. This is a safe place for you. And that's what Jesus says to his people. In John's gospel Jesus says to his disciples.

I'm going to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you. I'll come again and I'll take you to myself. So that where I am. There you may be also. Whatever you're going through. Whatever crosses your bearing. Jesus himself has prepared a place for you. Where you truly belong. Last thing.

In the book of Revelation. The final book in the Bible. We're given a word picture. Of what's going to happen at the end of time. In chapter 14. It says that one day.

The Lord of the harvest is going to return. And he's going to bring in another grain harvest. Not barley. Not wheat. But everyone. Who's taken refuge in him.

[30 : 07] He'll gather them up. Under his wings. And bring them safely home. Would you believe it? That the God who guided Ruth into the field. Is the same God who's guiding your life tonight.

That the God who saw Naomi in her bitterness. Sees you too. That the God who welcomed the outsider. Welcomes sinners still. Because if that's true.

Then you're never abandoned. Never unseen. Never beyond redemption. The chesed love of God. Is a love that never lets go. No matter the cost.

Let's pray. Lord God of steadfast love. We ask tonight that you would remind us. That no matter our circumstances in life.

You are with us. You're the Lord of the harvest. Who controls the times and the seasons. The sun and the rain. Nothing happens without you knowing. And so when things are good. And when things are hard.

[31 : 05] Lord help us to have faith. That you are ultimately working all things together for good. For those who trust in you. Lord we ask that even tonight. You would open our eyes.

To see the people who have a place. In our line of vision. People for us. To show faithful sacrificial love towards.

Melt hard hearts. So we will love others in the way that we should. If we want to be imitators of Christ. Steadfastly. Loyal. Sacrificially. Expecting nothing in return.

But that your name Lord. Would be praised. Help us now to sing to your glory. For your faithful love towards us is great. And you are worthy of all praise. In Jesus name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.