

Ruth

Lesson 2

Introduction

Ruth's first chapter shows how Naomi felt bitter, empty, and afflicted by the Lord following a series of disasters, including a famine, a move to Moab, the death of Elimelech, the inability of her sons to have children, and the death of her adult sons, that left Naomi destitute and vulnerable, even though one of her Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth, heroically chose to accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem.

How plausible is Naomi's assertion that her personal disasters meant the Lord was against her?

In contrast to the current time, the Mosaic Covenant included promises of earthly success

- Deut. 15:4-6 – there should be no poor Israelites
- Lev. 26:3-5 – national obedience will result in agricultural abundance
- Deut. 28:1-14 – national obedience will result in material blessings in family life, economics, and politics
- Deut. 29:1-68 – national disobedience will result material curses in family life, economics, and politics
- In contrast, multiple passages in the NT indicate that, in the current church age, earthly circumstances—good or bad—are poor indicators of God's feelings toward a believer. Mark 8:34-36; 1 Pet. 4:12-13, 19, and 5:9; Rom. 8:17-18; 2 Cor. 1:3-5, 8-11; Phil. 1:29-30; James 2:5-7 and 5:1-6;

But the OT recognized that some Israelites would not experience earthly success

- Deut. 15:11 – there will always be some poor people in Israel
- Lev. 13:1-46 – regulations for skin diseases
- Lev. 19:14 – don't abuse deaf or blind
- Multiple individuals who were generally righteous and lived during the Mosaic Covenant experienced personal suffering: (a) Hannah was barren and bullied by Peninnah for many years before she had Samuel (1 Sam. 1:1-20); (b) David spent 10 or more years fleeing from Saul before being recognized as king over 1 tribe at age 30 (2 Sam. 2:4; 5:4-5); (c) Daniel and his friends endured the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, then were taken into captivity and sent to Babylon, where they may have been castrated (Dan. 1:1-5; 2 Kings 20:18); (d) Hebrews refers to multiple unnamed righteous people during the OT who suffered terribly despite being faithful (Heb. 11:36-38)
- John 9:3 – Jesus said neither blind man nor his parents sinned
- Luke 13:1-5 – Jesus said neither unjustly executed Galileans nor victims of tower collapse were more guilty than other Israelites

And the Lord expresses special compassion and concern for disadvantaged groups

- Exo. 22:22-4 – If a widow or orphan cries out for justice, the Lord hears them
- Deut. 10:18-19 – The Lord defends widows and the fatherless, and loves and provides for resident aliens
- Deut. 24:17-22 – Leave some harvest "leftovers" for alien, fatherless, and widows
- Deut. 26:12-14 – Set aside a harvest tithe every third year for Levites, aliens, fatherless, and widows

- Psalm 68:4-6 and 146:5-9 – The Lord upholds the oppressed, including alien, fatherless, and widow and frustrates the wicked
- James 1:17 – Pure religion includes looking after widows and orphans
- Lev. 25:54-55; Prov. 14:31 – The Lord is concerned for all his people, including the poor

In sum, Naomi's view that her terrible circumstances must mean that the Lord is against her is an emotionally natural reaction, and even has some spiritual logic to it, especially if you narrowly focus on passages listing covenant blessings and curses or on the concept of the Lord's sovereignty, which is essentially the argument made by Job's "friends." A broader view of the OT indicates that, even in the Mosaic Covenant, generally righteous people could experience suffering and the Lord repeatedly expresses support for groups touched by suffering, such as widows, orphans, and resident aliens, who were usually fleeing some difficult circumstance, so it is not theologically accurate even during the Mosaic Covenant era to assume that extreme suffering means the Lord is against an Israelite. This can be somewhat explained by God's plan to fully remove the effects of the fall at the conclusion of Jesus's salvific actions and not before. But when someone like Naomi or Job is in the midst of terrible suffering, scripture indicates that the comfort Ruth offers is more effective than the misguided spiritual clichés shared by Job's friends (after they had sat with him for one week, Job 2:13). Theology concerning suffering is generally more helpful before one encounters suffering or well afterwards.

Scene 2A: How will Naomi and Ruth get food to eat? (2:1-3)

- *Naomi had a relative . . . who's name was Boaz* – The narrator begins the chapter with some facts about a man named Boaz, giving the reader an information advantage over Ruth. Some think "Boaz" means "in him is strength" but that is uncertain. The other facts provided by the narrator are more important. First, Boaz is part of Elimelech's clan and thus related to Naomi through Elimelech. Commentators say a household was a subunit of a clan which was a subunit of a tribe, so Boaz is probably a cousin or nephew to one degree or another. This means he could potentially owe duties under the OT law to Elimelech. See Lev. 25:23-28, 47-55. Second, Boaz is also described as "a man of standing" (NIV), or "a worthy man" (ESV). Translators struggle with this phrase. They agree it is a compliment, but say it has a wide range of potential meanings, including mighty warrior (Fighting men of Jericho, Joshua 6:2; Gideon, Judges 6:12) or a man with some sort of standing, perhaps wealth, or a reputation for good character (Saul's father, 1 Sam. 9:2.) Nothing in the book suggests that Boaz is a soldier, but the rest of chapter provides evidence of both wealth and good character, so he may have been of "man of standing" in multiple senses of the word. This verse would suggest to the Israelite audience that Boaz might have an obligation to help Naomi on Elimelech's behalf and might have the means and willingness to do so, but how closely Boaz is related and how much help he would offer are open questions at this point.
- *Let me go to the fields and pick up left over grain . . .* – Ruth was a grown woman, yet she politely asks Naomi for permission to go gleaning. This deference to the authority of the older woman fits that culture. Although ancient Israel did not have food stamps or welfare checks, the OT Law commanded other forms of charity or welfare for the poor. One example was gleaning, a practice where people could pick the bits of a crop missed by harvesters. Deut 24:19-22. Another example was the third-year crop tithe. Deut. 14:28-29 and 26:12-15 (every third year, a tenth of the produce was supposed to go to a Levite, resident alien, orphan, and widow fund). There is no evidence in Ruth that Bethlehem had a "third-year crop tithe" fund available for Naomi and Ruth. That does not seem surprising because Bethlehem had recently

endured a famine, and this practice would require a level of community organization, stability, and discipline inconsistent with the picture painted by the book of Judges. Ruth says she will glean wherever she can find favor. As an alien and widow, Ruth should have a legal right to glean, but especially during the time of the Judges, Ruth would have no way to enforce this rule herself, so she knew that she would be at the mercy of owner of each field. Moreover, Ruth would need to be careful as a single woman in the countryside—this plan involves some danger. Naomi agrees to the plan. There is no indication that either Ruth or Naomi gave any thought to Naomi gleaning, suggesting Naomi’s age prevents her from doing this kind of hard labor.

- *As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz . . .* – The NIV says that Ruth found herself in Boaz’s field “as it turned out.” The ESV says she “happened” to end up there. The point is that, from Ruth’s perspective, she chose the field without knowing that Boaz owned it, much less that Boaz was related to Elimelech. But in my opinion, the reason the narrator revealed Boaz’s relationship to Elimelech before and after Ruth makes this choice is to help the reader see divine providence working through Ruth’s seemingly random choice. Clearly, the narrator wants the reader to evaluate Boaz as a potential source of assistance for Naomi, even though Ruth is not aware of that possibility.
- *Summary:* Scene 2A begins with another crisis for Naomi and Ruth, having enough food to eat, and introduces a potential source of help, Boaz. Ruth continues to display humility and a servant’s heart by choosing to glean even though it involves hard labor in a dangerous environment.

Scene 2B: Ruth’s hard work and Boaz’s generosity and thoughtfulness provide more food than expected. (2:4-17)

- *Boaz arrives . . .* – As Ruth is working in Boaz’s field, he arrives from town to see how the harvest is going. The NIV introduces his arrival with “just then.” The ESV uses “and behold.” Other options include “And look” or even “wouldn’t you know it.” The NIV’s translation seems like the weakest option, as commentators say the Hebrew phrase is not focused on timing so much as drawing the reader into the scene and highlighting the “coincidence” that Boaz came to check on this particular field while Ruth happened to be working in it.
- *Boaz greets and blesses his workers* – Boaz greets his workers with a friendly blessing showing respect for the Lord, which they return in kind.
- *Who is protecting Ruth?* – Boaz notices Ruth and, translated literally, asks his foreman to whom the young woman belongs. To modern readers, this sounds like Boaz views Ruth as a piece of property, not a full human being. The rest of the book shows this is not at all what he means. He is asking who is responsible for protecting this woman who is out in the country by herself in a dangerous situation.
- *She’s a Moabite woman . . .* – The foreman explains that Ruth is the young Moabite woman who accompanied Naomi, indicating that Naomi’s story was well-known around town. He further reports that Ruth asked permission to glean by picking grain left in the field in between the bundles left by the harvesters and that she has been working hard. The NIV has the phrase “in the shelter” at the end of 2:7. Commentators say there isn’t a translation of the Hebrew text that makes sense and fits the context. They think the text may be corrupt and it would be better to admit that the meaning of the last phrase is unknown. Omitting it would not change the passage. The foreman’s information would let Boaz know that Ruth had a legal basis for

asking to glean, and that she is doubly vulnerable while gleaning as a foreign woman with no protection.

- *Boaz acts to protect and help provide for Ruth* – Boaz addresses Ruth as “daughter” signaling an intent to protect her and not take advantage of her. It also seems likely that he is older than her, but the amount of the age difference is unknown. Boaz invites Ruth to work alongside his female servants during the harvest in all his fields. Boaz orders his male servants not to harass her, and gives her permission to drink the water gathered for his workers. Boaz is essentially treating Ruth like one of his servants, even though she is not working for him or cannot compensate him.
- *Ruth acknowledges Boaz’s charity* – Ruth demonstrates humility and graciousness by acknowledging the extent of Boaz’s kindness to someone with no social status or ability to repay that kindness. It is true that the OT law commanded Israelites to be kind to widows and aliens. Deut. 10:17-19. One could argue that Boaz is merely treating Ruth with same kindness and respect we would hope that any Israelite in his position would extend to her. But, especially in harsh times, many people fall short of their legal or social responsibilities, and Ruth’s attitude is a good model for how believers should appreciate kindness. Phil. 2:3-4; 1 Pet. 5:5-6.
- *The basis for Boaz’s charity* – Ruth asks why Boaz is being so kind. Boaz explains that he has heard about the extent of Ruth’s kindness to Naomi, even though this required Ruth to leave her own community and live with strangers. Boaz acknowledges the spiritual implications of Ruth’s choices by invoking a blessing from the Lord on her behalf. Boaz prays that the Lord, the God of Israel, would fully or abundantly repay Ruth for her kindness to Naomi. One theological basis for this blessing is that the Lord says Israelites belong to him as his covenant people, so showing kindness to an Israelite is kindness to the Lord. (Gen. 12:1-2; Lev. 25:54-55; Prov. 14:31, 19:17.) Boaz adds a second basis: Ruth herself has taken refuge under the Lord’s wings, like a chick running to a mother bird. The Bible more often uses analogies based on fatherly love to describe the Lord, but analogies based on motherly affection are also appropriate. (Matt. 23:37.) As this chapter demonstrates, Boaz recognizes that he can participate in the Lord’s blessing of Ruth by helping provide food for her and Naomi. (Compare James 2:14-17.)
- *Ruth again acknowledges the extent of Boaz’s kindness* – Ruth essentially responds, “you are too kind.” She gives two bases for her gratitude. First, the provision of a way to gather food safely has given her relief. This indicates Ruth knew she and Naomi were in a crisis and that gleaning was a move of desperation. Second, Boaz has spoken kindly and treated her with dignity even though her social standing is lower than a servant.
- *Boaz includes Ruth in the meal* – Boaz and the harvesters break during the day for a meal. Boaz invites Ruth to share the meal, even though she is not an Israelite or one of his workers. Food was the top priority, but social acceptance is another important need. Boaz continues to be generous by serving her more than she needs so that she has leftovers to take home.
- *Boaz further instructs his workers* – Commentators debate the details of Boaz’s instruction, but seem to agree on the point. Gleaners were supposed to look for grain left behind by the harvesters; they should not remove grain from the sheaves gathered by the harvesters. Boaz told his workers not to stop Ruth even if she took some grain from the sheaves. He also told them to leave some stalks behind for her to pick up.
- *Summary:* Ruth unknowingly chooses to glean in a field owned by Boaz on a day when Boaz chooses to check on that field. Boaz goes above and beyond his legal obligations by arranging

for Ruth to glean safely and productively in Boaz' fields throughout the harvest and by inviting her to share a meal with him and his workers. Boaz explains that his generosity is inspired by Ruth's devotion to Naomi and the Lord.

Scene 2C: Naomi appreciates Ruth's efforts and Boaz's generosity

- *Ruth's gleaning yields an ephah* – In a transition verse, the narrator says that Ruth spent the entire day in Boaz's field and her efforts produced an "ephah" of grain. Commentators do not know exactly how much grain was considered to be an "ephah" in Ruth's day. There is general agreement that it was supposed to reflect 1/10 of the amount of a typical donkey load (which was called a homer), and that an ephah represented an extraordinary amount for a day of gleaning. The most recent estimates range from 10-20 liters, or approximately 5-10 days of food for two people. In addition, Ruth had leftover grain from lunch. Ruth must have been strong to carry this amount back to town after a day of field work.
- *Naomi recognizes the amount is a remarkable blessing* – Naomi is duly impressed with Ruth's results and excitedly asks where Ruth worked and prays for a blessing on the male field owner who allowed Ruth to gather so much food. Naomi's ability to ask for a blessing on someone else is a positive sign.
- *Naomi explains that Boaz is a kinsman-redeemer* – When Ruth identifies Boaz, Naomi excitedly exclaims that someone has shown kindness to the living and the dead. The possibility for who showed that kindness are the Lord or Boaz. The ESV concludes that Naomi is asking for Boaz to be blessed by the Lord, who has shown kindness to the living and the dead. (Gen. 24:27.) The NIV concludes that Naomi is asking for the Lord to bless Boaz because Boaz has shown kindness to the living and the dead. (2 Sam. 2:5.) I favor the NIV's side of this debate, but the debate is a little academic because Naomi surely views Boaz as the Lord's instrument and so the Lord's divine loving-kindness is being channeled through Boaz's earthly loving-kindness. Scholars agree that "the dead" refers to Boaz's deceased clanmates Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion, and "the living" means Naomi and Ruth. Naomi explains to Ruth that Boaz is their "close relative" and one of their "kinsman-redeemers," or a "goel." Commentators say the Hebrew term translated as "close relative" is vague and could apply to immediate family or more distant clan members. The OT law describes "kinsman-redeemers" doing the following:

--the "nearest" kinsman-redeemer repurchases or "redeems" land sold by a poor relative, Lev. 25:25-28;

--"any" blood relative may redeem an Israelite who has become poor and sold himself to be a servant to a non-Israelite, Lev. 25:47-52;

--receiving payment of reparations owed to a deceased relative, Num. 5:8

A "kinsman-redeemer" thus steps forward when poverty or death threatens the normal status of an Israelite's property or his personal freedom. The underlying principle is very similar to the principle underlying Levirate marriage referenced by Naomi:

--If a man dies with no heir, the "brother" of the deceased man has a duty to marry the deceased brother's widow to produce an heir for the deceased brother, Deut. 25:5-10.

But note that the term used in the Levirate marriage passage often implies a closer relationship than "close relative/goel," although arguably "brother" could in a casual or broad sense be extended to clan members who were not literally brothers. Naomi's description of Boaz thus implies that Boaz is one of the male clan members who has a right and responsibility—if he has the means—to assist them. Because Boaz has multiple fields and servants, he certainly seems to

have some wealth available, but the extent to which he is willing to use it, and whether there are other kinsman-redeemers are unknown at this point, especially since Ruth is from Moab.

- *Naomi confirms the wisdom of gleaning in Boaz's field* – After Ruth reports Boaz's invitation for her to continue to glean in his fields, Naomi confirms that she should do so because gleaning is dangerous for someone in Ruth's position. The narrator concludes by informing us that Ruth continued to glean until the barley and wheat were harvested, i.e., gathered. Commentators guess that to be a period of approximately 6-7 weeks.
- *Summary*: Through Ruth's courage and hard work, and Boaz's kind generosity, the Lord meets Naomi and Ruth's need for food, which encourages Naomi.

Applications

Ruth

Ruth is a great example of walking by faith, not sight. 2 Cor. 5:7. From a human perspective, Naomi's situation is overwhelming and helpless. Logically, there is no reason to expect Ruth's decision to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem to improve Naomi's future prospects; nor was there any reason to believe that Ruth could find enough food to sustain two people for a significant period of time through the dangerous and grueling method of gleaning. But when believers focus on doing what God wants them to do, God often amplifies their efforts in surprising ways. Matt. 14:16-21; 1 Kings 17:12-16; 2 Cor. 12:8.

In the Matthew episode, Jesus provides the amplification through a spectacular miracle. Ruth is an example of how divine amplification typically occurs: through unforeseen assistance from faithful people, like Ruth and then Boaz. There was an interesting example this past week in Kentucky:

In the *Washington Post*, Kentuckian Cole Douglas Claybourn [recounts his experience](#) living through last weekend's tornadoes—and how his community rallied in response. “This was the first time in my life I'd felt any unease about a storm. It was also the first time that I took the official warnings and directions seriously, and that probably is what saved my life,” he writes. “When daylight broke, the true magnitude of the devastation was visible. A hundred yards or so from my house, my neighbor B.J.'s house was leveled. By 7 a.m., B.J. was more concerned with helping his neighbors than dealing with his own home's destruction. B.J. embodied the spirit that this entire community has shown in the days since the storms hit. By Saturday afternoon, a team of church volunteers whom I'd never met had arrived to clean the debris and tree limbs out of our yard. Others brought food and water. Colleagues drove their cars to me so I could charge my phone. All over the state, Kentuckians have shown up—whether it was with a chainsaw, a wallet, or a hug—to take care of their own. Scores of local sports teams, school organizations, and churches have flooded the streets with volunteers.”

The Morning Dispatch Dec. 16, 2021 from TheDispatch.Com.

Boaz

Boaz is a great example of showing concern for the vulnerable and honoring the Lord in the process. Boaz asks the Lord to help Ruth and Naomi, and helps them himself. When someone is in crisis, it is important to pray for God to help them **and** to do what you can to help the situation. If each part of the body of Christ does what it is able to do, the entire body should be able to function well. 1 Cor. 12:12-31; 2 Cor. 8:12-15; Eph. 4:16.

The Lord

The narrator's introduction of Boaz and the "happenstance" of Ruth choosing to glean in the field that Boaz was coming to visit is meant to reveal the Lord's providential care for Naomi and Ruth. It also shows that the Lord's loving-kindness is manifested through the loving-kindness of believers like Boaz and Ruth.

Naomi

Naomi's role in this chapter is mostly passive. But we do see how her decision in Chapter 1 to move to Bethlehem—where she had heard the Lord was active—begins to bear fruit as the Lord demonstrates His concern for Naomi through the loving-kindness of Boaz and Ruth. Despite Naomi's disappointment with the Lord, Chapter 2 hints that Naomi was wise not to isolate herself from the Lord and His people.