

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

Handfuls of Purpose – (Ruth Chapter 2) This week we continue our up-close observation of the sovereign, providential working of God in the life of Naomi and Ruth. However, the central focus shifts somewhat away from Naomi (she assumes a secondary, supporting role), and moves to Ruth, the faithful Moabitess who followed her mother-in-law into the land of Israel and sought refuge under the covenantal wings of YHWH. We are given some indication of where things might be leading in chapter two at the very end of chapter one. The last verse of chapter 1 (vs. 22b) states, “...*And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*” Again the agrarian theme of God’s sovereign work in the “fields” is continued throughout chapter two, and the remainder of the book. We saw this theme early on when the term “fields of Moab” was used in lieu of “land of Moab”. We are about to witness the providential hand of an ever-present God in the fields of Boaz, the kinsman redeemer of Naomi.

Again, it is important to point out that this story occurs in the period of the judges. The contrast with the national portrayal of God’s people vexed with the just punishment of their sins and continually under the discipline of a gracious God that is the hallmark characteristic of the period is contrasted by the providential involvement of a covenantal God in the lives of both Naomi (a member of the covenant community) as well as Ruth (an outsider).

Part One: *In the Fields of Boaz* – The plot continues with Naomi and Ruth seeking sustenance through the act of gleaning. This great lady (Naomi), who married into one of the great families in Bethlehem, was reduced to seeking her sustenance through the modern-day equivalent of food stamps.

According to Leviticus 23:22, “*And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.*” The book of Deuteronomy elaborates on this a bit, “*When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore, I command you to do this*” (Deuteronomy 24:19-22).

These verses tell us much about the purpose and process of gleaning. According to Leviticus, the people of God were instructed not to be efficient and utilize every corner of their fields, and not to gather any grain that has fallen in the process of harvesting the crop. Deuteronomy builds on this and says even if you bind a sheaf for harvesting, but then forget it and leave it behind, you are not allowed to go back and get it, but leave it for the poor, fatherless, widow and the stranger (non-member of the covenant community) that dwells among you. We see here a beautiful demonstration of God’s providence even

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over the blades of wheat that fall to the ground or the memory of harvested sheaves. God knows better than the individual farmer, the needs of the poor within the community. Therefore, God's people are instructed by way of implication to see his providential hand behind every blade of barley or wheat, every grape or olive that falls between their fingers or clings stubbornly to the limb. They are even to see the providential hand of God behind forgetting a certain sheaf and leaving it behind. So, what is going on in this *field of Boaz*? A visual demonstration to the people of God written down for perpetuity of God's providential care in action. What makes this even more meaningful is something of which the reader of the book is aware, but the characters in the drama are not: the widow and the stranger in this story are the ancestors of king David and Christ.

Ruth assumedly abides in the field of Boaz and gleanes after his reapers diligently until Boaz himself comes to check in on the harvest. The biblical description of the man, though translated in the ESV as "worthy" is actually the word *gibor*, which means "mighty" in Hebrew. The KJV properly translates the word and associated phrases as, "...a mighty man of wealth..." We are not told how Ruth came to glean in the field of this man, whether pointed there by a local or by accident. What we are told is that her presence there even if quite by accident from a human perspective, is divinely orchestrated. She was at the right place at the right time for Boaz to catch a glimpse of her. Why he would have singled her out, we do not know. It is highly unlikely that she was the only gleaner in the field if he is as great and wealthy of a man as the scriptures seem to suggest. When Boaz enters the field he asks his foreman, "*Whose young woman is this?*" It is interesting that he did not ask who she was, but to whom she belonged. This might be a hint dropped by the author as to the stirrings of romantic interest in the young lady, but let us not be too hasty to jump to that conclusion.

It is believed by one commentary, that based on the reading of the Hebrew text, Ruth asked special permission of the foreman of Boaz's field, to glean even among the reapers instead of after them.¹ Ruth is reported as having requested this in 2:7, "*She said, please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.*" Apparently she was prevented by the foreman from doing so since gleaners were not traditionally allowed to glean among the sheaves, but after the sheaves had been removed. This purportedly resulted in Ruth standing resolute all day, which would have been the reason she attracted Boaz's attention. Although this reading of the text is possible, it is inconclusive and not the rendering expressed in either the ESV or the KJV.

Part Two: Favor in the Sight of a Mighty Man – Regardless which of the above translations is accurate, Boaz demonstrated *hesed* to Ruth, lovingly calling her "my daughter" and instructing her not to leave his fields, but gather grain among his reapers (2:8). He specifically charged the young male workers not to harass her and invited her to drink from water drawn for the workers. Ruth responds to this unmerited kindness, by falling to the ground and asking why he is being so gracious to a foreigner. Boaz informs her that her reputation precedes her. He then blesses her by stating, "*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!*" Ruth's response is quite interesting. She states, "...you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants." (2:12-13). In other words, she acknowledges that her entry into the people of God is being initiated due to the inclusive actions of this kinsman redeemer. What is more remarkable is what Boaz communicates to the foreman after his conversation with Ruth. He states simply, "...pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her

¹ Hubbard, Robert I. Jr. *NICOT, The Book of Ruth*. Pg. 148

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to glean, and do not rebuke her.” The KJV describes this beautifully, “...And let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her...” What is here emphasized is the purposeful providence of God. Note the three-fold allowances graciously provided by Boaz: 1) protection from the young men; 2) permission to gather among the reapers between the harvested sheaves, and 3) fallen bundles purposefully left for her to glean. These three provisions correspond to the characteristics of being protected by the covenant of God.

- 1) *Protection from those who harass*: When God called Abraham out of the land of his nativity (similar to Ruth leaving the land of her nativity), God promised that he would be his “shield” (Genesis 15:1).
- 2) *Permission to gather grain among the reapers (A sense of belonging)*: God promises Abraham that he will make his name great and make him a blessing to all the nations of the earth. This promise would come by way of a *seed* born to the patriarch in his old age when it was no longer humanly possible to conceive and bear a child (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5-6). The terms of the covenant made Abraham a friend of God and gave him access to the righteousness of God that comes graciously through faith (Genesis 15:6). In a sense the covenant of God gave Abraham a sense of belonging. The author of the book of Hebrews describes it this way: “*By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*” (Hebrews 11:9-10)
- 3) *Fallen bundles purposefully left*: One of the covenantal promises God made to Abraham was that he would give to him all the land of Canaan, as far as the eyes could see. This land would be purposefully given to Abraham’s descendants, not because they were entitled to it or had it coming to them, but because of the gracious covenantal commitment (*hesed*) of God. As Israel took their place among the nations, they did so quite differently. Their story of origin was one of miraculous and divine appointment. Their mission would be the same.

In the truest sense, the blessing of Boaz accompanied by his generous provision is indicative of Ruth’s acceptance into the people of God. It would take an even greater act on the part of the kinsman redeemer to make this membership official, but the ball had already been put in motion. To further support this we see that he invites Ruth to join his reapers at the table and not to eat alone as other gleaners would be expected to do (2:14). She has found favor in his sight, and the end result will undoubtedly be what she least expected.

Part Three: A Kinsman Redeemer – When Ruth returned home to Naomi, she brought a significant amount of grain, so much so that Naomi blessed the man even before she knew his name. Our text records her as saying, “*Blessed be the man who took notice of you... (2:19)*” In other words, it was obvious from the quantity of grain that she brought home what had happened, it was an amount far greater than that reasonably expected from a gleaner. She knew that the man must have taken notice of Ruth and shown her preferential treatment. Ruth and her mother-in-law were saved from starvation.

When Ruth discloses to her mother-in-law the name of the man in whose field she labored, Naomi’s response was two-fold. First she informs Ruth that the man, Boaz, is a *goel* or kinsman redeemer. She attributes his mercy and kindness to Naomi and Ruth (and to the dead) as *hesed*. Then, she instructs Ruth, “*It is good my daughter that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be*

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assaulted.” This comment was made immediately after Ruth reveals that Boaz has encouraged her to stay close by his young men until they have finished the harvest. It could well be that Naomi, conscious of his *hesed* demonstrated through the bestowal of such bounty, suspected that he might be willing to perform other redemptive acts such as marrying Ruth for the sake of raising up a name in remembrance of the dead. The author is perhaps dropping hints like Gretel’s breadcrumbs so that the reader will not be caught off-guard by what is about to transpire.

The term and function of a *goel* is an interesting one. According to Hubbard, “*Goel* was a term from the realm of Israelite family law. It describes not a precise kinship relationship but the near relatives to whom both law and custom gave certain duties toward the clan.”² You may recall that a *goel* was the one responsible for exacting the price of justice in the event of a slain clansman or family member according to Levitical law (Numbers 35:12; Deuteronomy 19:6,12). Hubbard points out that the term is used metaphorically for one whose responsibility was to assist a clan member in a lawsuit in order to see that justice is done. He continues by stating, “Two assumptions underlay this custom. First, a strong feeling of tribal solidarity (both people and their possessions) made every disruption of tribal unity an intolerable breach that had to be repaired. Second, “redemption” – whether people or property or both – constituted the restoration of that primal tribal wholeness.”³

Boaz was the one who had the ability to set things right again. Whether Naomi had forgotten about him or was intimately aware of his circumstances and the chance of redemption and was purposefully playing her cards, scripture does not say. It does appear that she knew him well enough prior to leaving Bethlehem to know his character because of her statement in the next chapter (3:18). The fact that Naomi calls Boaz, “...*a close relative of ours...*” shows that she considered Ruth, though a Moabitess, to be part of the family. The profundity of this thought is later highlighted by the author when he seemingly randomly describes Ruth as a Moabite (2:21). Ruth’s acceptance by Boaz, is only the first step, but it would prove a crucial first step. The next step was to be accepted by all of Israel and officially included in the people of God. In order for this to happen, the curse of Deuteronomy 23:3 would have to be removed. How would such an event come about?

Conclusion: As we ponder the second chapter of Ruth, it is helpful to entertain at least two questions by way of drawing a contemporary application from the text. First, is the provision for the poor in a manner equivalent to gleaning currently the responsibility of the church? What might such a ministry look like? Secondly, does the concept of *goel* or kinsman redeemer aid in understanding the role and nature of the saving work of Christ? If so, how?

² Hubbard, Robert I. Jr. *NICOT, The Book of Ruth*. Pg. 188

³ Hubbard, Robert I. Jr. *NICOT, The Book of Ruth*. Pg. 189