Ruth’s Initiative and the Character of Boaz

Ruth 2

Ruth 2: Synopsis and Big Idea

• In order to survive and provide for Naomi, Ruth sets out to glean and providentially happens upon the field of Boaz, who magnanimously supplies her with food, protection, encouragement, and honor and who happens to be both a close relative and an instrument of God’s kindness.

• God is present and active when his people take initiative and seek the welfare of others.
Ruth 2: Key Themes

• God orchestrates events in the lives of his people.
• God blesses those who bless others.
• God protects and cares for the vulnerable.
• God’s faithfulness may come through human expressions of faithfulness.

Ruth 2: Literary Context

• Chaps 2-3 are C and C’ in the chiastic structure
  – They focus primarily on Ruth and Boaz, while Naomi is the focus of the beginning and end of the story
• Chaps 2-3 are complementary
  – They each employ the term *hayil* to describe the main characters (2:1 and 3:11)
  – They each have the same sequence of episodes:
    • Ruth/Naomi initiating plans (2:1–3; 3:1–5)
    • Boaz favoring Ruth (2:4–17; 3:6–15)
Ruth 2: Background: Gleaning

• Gleaning was a way for widows, orphans, & sojourners in ancient Israel to retain their dignity by having to work hard for their sustenance.
• It required that reapers intentionally neglect some produce on the edges of their fields.
• This welfare system is stipulated in the Torah (Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19),
  – but one cannot assume that everyone upheld the practice, especially during the time of the judges (cf. Ruth 2:9, 15, 22).
• While some ancient Near Eastern peoples would leave a portion of their crops unharvested as an offering to local fertility deities,
  – the Israelites would do so as an expression of loving their neighbor (Lev. 19:18) and treating the vulnerable with justice (Deut. 24:17–25:19) in order that God may bless their work (Deut. 24:19).

Ruth 2: Background: Gleaning

• Ruth gleans through the barley harvest and continues until the end of the wheat harvest (2:23), commemorated by the Feast of Weeks/Pentecost.

• While wheat and barley are sown at the same time (in November-December), wheat matures about a month later than barley.
  – The duration of Ruth’s gleaning is somewhere around seven weeks, from mid-April to early June
Ruth 2: Background: Gleaning

Ruth 2: Theological Emphases

- Ruth “happens” upon the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who, Ruth learns later, is Elimelek’s close relative (2:1, 3, 20).
  - Ruth 2:3 shows how people of faith may experience God’s sovereignty in their everyday lives.

- While the phraseology in 2:3 ("her happening happened upon") may sound like it describes a random coincidence or a stroke of luck, it should not be viewed from the modern secular perspective about fate or chance.
  - Since the narrator explicitly asserts elsewhere that God furnishes food and controls conception (1:6; 4:13), this phrase must be understood as a subtle hint that God specially orchestrates this encounter, albeit in a “hidden” manner.
  - While Ruth certainly makes her own free choices here, God superintends her steps according to his own perfect plan and knowledge.
Ruth 2: Theological Emphases

• This perspective on the providential relationship between God and people may also help to explain the ambiguity of Naomi’s statement about the one “who has not forsaken His kindness to the living and the dead” (2:20 NKJV).
  – Does this refer to Yahweh or to Boaz?

  – While Boaz is the most probable antecedent of the pronoun “who,” the wider narrative context suggests that God is also showing kindness to the living and the dead through the faithful deeds of Boaz.

  – Boaz rightly acknowledges that Ruth has come under the protection and care of God (2:12), but Boaz himself also begins to serve as God’s primary means of blessing to the widows.

  – This powerfully illustrates how God is faithful to those who show faithfulness (Ps. 18:25).

Ruth 2: Application

• The character of Ruth and Boaz is commended by the narrator:
  – Boaz is called a “man of standing” (2:1) and he appears to embody the teachings of Torah in his words and actions.

  – Ruth is commended for her acts of kindness and commitment to Naomi, and she is compared to Father Abraham.

• However, their character is ultimately a reflection of God, and this story is primarily God’s self-revelation.
Ruth 2: Application

• **Principle of Practical Providence #1: God is a benevolent parent who provides for and protects his people.**

• This image is powerfully communicated through Boaz’s metaphor about God’s maternal “wings” (2:12)
  – It appears frequently in Scripture (see Pss. 17:8; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4; Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34; cf. Gen. 1:2; Isa. 34:15)
  – It is celebrated by the psalmist: “How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings” (Ps. 36:7).

• Trusting that God has a good plan and does what is best for his people (Rom. 8:28) is foundational for living godly lives under his care.

Ruth 2: Application

• **Principle of Practical Providence #2: God orchestrates events according to his plan even though Ruth takes initiative (2:2–3).**

• Human responsibility to choose and act wisely is not neutralized by divine sovereignty.
  – “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil 2:12–13).

• Responsible human initiatives may be the very means of God’s sovereign provision for his people, even in uncertain circumstances
  – That is, providence should not paralyze but energize godly action.
Ruth 2: Application

• **Principle of Practical Providence #3: God’s faithfulness is expressed through Boaz’s benevolent actions toward Ruth (2:20).**

• Selfless and generous actions, like bearing “each other’s burdens” and doing “good to all people, especially to . . . believers” (Gal 6:2, 9–10), are often the tangible means of God’s presence in other people’s lives.

• Acts of love toward each other are how Christians can reflect God’s character (John 13:34–35; 1 John 4:12), and God may bless his people as they are a blessing to each other (see 2 Sam 2:5–6; Ps 18:25).

Ruth 2: Expository Remarks

• **Man of standing (2:1)**

  – a person of wealth, prominence, and influence (cf., Judg. 6:12; 11:1; 1 Sam. 9:1; 16:18; see also *hayil* in Ruth 3:11; 4:11).

  – Boaz resembles the husband of Proverbs 31:23, who is “respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.”
Ruth 2: Expository Remarks

• You notice me—a foreigner (2:10)

  – In the next two verses, Boaz identifies this ethnic outsider as an Israelite insider based on
    • her faithful actions, which “amply serve in place of a genealogy,” and on
    • her coming to God’s people and to the refuge of his wings (cf. 1:8, 16; 2:11–12).

  – Furthermore, by bringing blessing and generosity to Naomi (see also 2:18; 3:10, 17; 4:11, 15), Ruth proves exceptional to the stereotype of Moabites as miserly people who curse Israelites (see Deut. 23:4; Num. 22).

Ruth 2: Expository Remarks

• How you left (2:11)

  – This key statement by Boaz may employ two allusions to passages in Genesis.
    • Ruth’s “leaving” (2:11) and “cleaving” (1:14; 2:8, 21, 23) activity in this story may echo the description of marriage in Gen 2:24.
    • Ruth’s leaving of her family and land is reminiscent of Abraham’s faithful actions in Gen 12:1, except that Ruth does so without any summons or assurances from God.
Ruth 2: Expository Remarks

• Wings (2:12)

– The imagery of protection and care under divine wings is common not only in Scripture (see above) but also in ancient Near Eastern iconography.
  • In Syria winged goddesses are portrayed nursing and protecting individuals.
  • In Egypt the deity Horus hovers behind Pharaoh in the form of a falcon, and Osiris is depicted between the wings of the goddess Isis
Ruth 2: Expository Remarks

• About an ephah (2:17)

  – This dry measurement in the preexilic period varies in capacity from 10 to 20 liters (= 2.64–5.28 US gallons).
    • It could probably last the two women for more than a week.
  – If Ruth collected an ephah every day for the entire 7 weeks of harvest (cf. 2:21, 23), she would gather enough barley & wheat to sustain them for 8-12 months.
  – The massive proportion of Boaz’s provision for these widows is a detail that would not be lost on the ancient audience of this account
    • It reveals Boaz’s generosity as well as Ruth’s industry.

Ruth 2: Expository Remarks

• Kindness (2:20)

  – The rich meaning of this Hebrew term (hesed) is difficult to capture in a single English word.
    • It can be rendered as “loyalty,” “faithfulness,” “devotion,” “love,” or any combination of these nuances.
  – Usually in Scripture it refers to God’s actions toward people (especially in a covenant relationship), but it can also refer to the actions of people in relationship to one another.
  – In the book of Ruth the term appears only three times (1:8; 2:20; 3:10), though the theme of hesed is found throughout.
Ruth 2: Expository Remarks

• Kindness (2:20)
  – Naomi refers somewhat ambiguously to the *hesed* shown to both the two living widows and the three dead men.
    • While the syntax indicates that Boaz is the one expressing this *hesed* (see 2 Sam 2:5), the literary and theological contexts indicate that God is simultaneously at work.
    • Boaz’s *hesed* to the widows in chapter 2 is an implicit answer to the prayers expressed by Naomi (for God’s *hesed* to her daughters-in-law; 1:8) and by Boaz (for God’s reward to Ruth; 2:12).

Ruth 2: Expository Remarks

• You might be harmed (2:22)
  – Naomi’s remark is a reminder that the setting is not safe for women, especially young, widowed, poor foreigners like Ruth (cf. 2:9, 15).
  – Boaz is exceptional in this period when many men were exploiting and violating the women around them (cf. Judg. 5:30; 11:30–40; 15:6; 19:16–30; 20:48; 21:10–23).
    • He worked hard to create and maintain a safe environment for the widows to flourish.