

Background

The most significant self-revelation of the Lord to Abraham took place upon Mount Moriah when He called Abraham to offer his only son as a sacrifice. It was there that the Lord stayed Abraham's hand as it was lifted up to strike his son and instead provided a sacrificial ram, who just "happened" to have a horn caught in a thicket. Abraham named that place Jehovah-Jireh, which means, "The Lord will Provide." (*Genesis 22:1-14*) That event was passed down from generation to generation in Israel but it was learned anew in countless ways within each generation and on a personal level by those who looked to Him. The Lord used a grazing ram caught by "chance" nearby to reveal His deep love for and faithfulness to those who trusted Him. The book of Ruth is an opportunity to learn this lesson again. As we will see in this chapter, Jehovah is the Lord of chance.

Ruth 1:22-2:2 – The Time of the Barley Harvest

Naomi and Ruth came to Bethlehem at an opportune time. It was the beginning of the barley harvest.

For a community named, "The House of Bread" (Bethlehem), this was a busy and exciting time, especially after having endured years of famine. In addition, barley was the first crop of the year that would be ready for harvest. Thus, Naomi and Ruth came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the most fruitful time of the year. Barley was usually harvested from late March to early April.



Understanding the significance of the events of this chapter and of the entire book requires us to immerse ourselves into ancient Jewish culture. We must learn about the process of harvesting barley, the laws of gleaning, and the laws concerning a kinsman redeemer.



Barley Harvesting

Barley and wheat were planted in the fall. Barley was the first crop to ripen and be ready for harvest in the spring. Other crops would follow including wheat, flax, figs, summer grapes, dates, fruits, and finally olives in the early fall.

Harvesting grain was hard labor that typically involved many people. There were eight distinct tasks to accomplish during the harvest:



1. The stalks of grain were cut with hand sickles and laid on the ground.

2. The cut stalks were gathered into bundles and tied together to become a sheaf. Sheaves were set up vertically in the fields as they were tied in order to continue the drying process and keep moisture away from the grains at the top of the sheaves.

3. Dried sheaves were moved to a threshing site, typically a flat, elevated area that was exposed

to wind, which would help in the threshing process.

4. The grains would be separated from the rest of the stalk and husk by “threshing.” This was accomplished by oxen walking on the stalks or dragging a cart of some type over the stalks.
5. Now that the grains were physically freed, they had to be separated by “winnowing.” The grain and husks/stalks would be thrown in to the air and the wind or a manual fan would blow the lighter husks/stalks away while the heavier grain would fall to the ground.
6. The remaining grain was gathered and sifted to clean out any foreign debris.
7. The clean grain was bagged and transported for storage or sale.
8. The chaff that blew away from the grain was gathered and burned in a large bonfire and the community enjoyed the completion of the work with a celebration.



This process would be completed over weeks as laborers would move through various fields preparing the sheaves and then leaving them to dry in preparation for transportation, threshing, and winnowing. It is not surprising that they celebrated when they completed this laborious process!

The Laws of Gleaning

Three Old Testament passages prescribe specific laws for land owners and field-laborers in regard to the manner in which they harvested their crops. They were required to make provision for the poor, the aliens (out-of-towners) and the widows in the community by allowing them to “glean” in the fields. To glean literally means to gather grain or other produce left by reapers in a field. Read *Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22*, and *Deuteronomy 24:19-22* and identify three rules that applied to gleaning barley:

1. Don't harvest to the edge of the field.
2. Don't go through and gather stalks of grain a second time (picking up those you missed).
3. Don't go back after a forgotten sheaf.

Why did the Lord have the Israelites make provision for the poor in this manner? Each of the passages cited above contains a clear statement of God's identity and authority to make



this command. In both Levitical passages, He affirms, “I am the Lord.” In Deuteronomy, He states, “I command you to do this.” The passage in Deuteronomy provides even more insight. He reminded the Israelites that they were slaves in Egypt. They were formerly poor and dependent upon others. Also, the land that they inhabited was given to them as a gift by the Lord. They were stewards of His possession and He promised to drive them out if they did not obey Him. He gave them the rain that watered their crops, and the health to labor. He possessed first rights to their land and all it produced. His demand was reasonable. **The Lord is teaching the Israelites to love others as He had loved them.**

Additionally, this provision was not a hand out for the poor. It was an opportunity to work and provide for basic needs. **The Lord upheld the moral standard of diligence while still showing compassion.**

The Kinsman Redeemer

We must address one final cultural obstacle, the laws pertaining to a “kinsman redeemer.” Three Old Testament passages describe the three responsibilities of a kinsman redeemer. Read each of the passages below and fill in the blanks.

1. *Leviticus 25:25-28* – Purchase the property sold by a brother who falls into poverty.
In this passage, the “nearest redeemer” (ESV) is the kinsman redeemer.
2. *Numbers 35:9-29* – Avenge the murder of a brother.
3. *Deuteronomy 25:5-10* – Marry the wife of a brother that dies.

Two of the three laws apply directly to the book of Ruth. Why was it important for property that was sold to be returned to the family? Israel was divided into distinct tribal allotments and maintaining the inheritance of a specific tribe and family within the tribe maintained the order prescribed by the Lord through Joshua when the land was divided.

Does the law of *Deuteronomy 25:5-10* clearly fit within the responsibilities of a “kinsman redeemer”? It is unclear that the responsibility to marry the wife of a deceased male relative extended beyond his immediate family (i.e. his brothers). Additionally, Naomi did not offer any hope to Ruth or Orpah in this regard when she told them that she could not provide other sons for them (Ruth 1:12-13). However, some with a more relative with a generous spirit might offer to fulfill this responsibility.

What was the consequence of failing to fulfill the responsibilities of a kinsman redeemer? We aren't provided the answer to this question for each of the laws, but the text of *Deuteronomy 25* is pretty clear that you become a social outcast if you don't fulfill family responsibilities. This is consistent with New Testament teaching which states, “*But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*” (1 Timothy 5:8)

We are introduced to Boaz (meaning vigorous, or strong) in verse one. He will be the imminent hero in this story, although we know the hero is really the Lord. In order for someone to serve as a kinsman redeemer, what three qualities are necessary?

1. They must be a near relative.
2. They must have the financial means/ability to fulfill the responsibility.
3. They must have character sufficient to step up to the responsibility.

Based on what we are told about Boaz in verse one, does he meet these requirements? Yes! He was of the clan (kindred) of Naomi's husband and was also described as a “worthy” man. This means he was a man of substance (wealth) and standing in the community (implying noble character).

What do we learn about Ruth from verse 2? She had holy ambition and humility towards Naomi. She recognized Naomi's standing and experience and put herself in submission to her.

Why did Ruth mention gleaning “in whose sight I shall find favor”? Wouldn't the laws of gleaning require an Israelite to allow her to glean? Ruth was both an alien to Israel and a widow, which made her eligible to glean on two counts. However, these were two reasons that she was at the bottom of the social ladder. We also know that just because the Lord required something in His law, not everyone obeyed it. That was a common problem in Israel, especially with the laws concerning the crops (2 Chronicles 36:20-21). Ruth was hoping to find someone of character and compassion to allow her to glean.

Ruth 2:3-7 – The Lord of Chance

Upon leaving Naomi to glean, Ruth “happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz...”

What is the writer conveying to us in this statement? **First, Ruth did not know Boaz or know about him. Her presence in that field was not personally premeditated, neither was it suggested or directed by Naomi. The writer attributed this to happenstance (chance or luck). Yet, the statement is clearly tongue-in-cheek because this situation is screaming, “this is the hand of God.” Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” A well-studied Israelite knows that there is no such thing as chance within the providence of God.**

It is important for us to recognize the hand of God working good in the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Though imperfect, they were each moving towards God to guide and provide for them and we see God working (though they had no clue) to bring them all to a better place than they were before. Naomi and Ruth were childless widows. Boaz was an unmarried older man with no children of his own (to our knowledge). Not only would the Lord provide for them in a situation that seemed hopeless, but He cast a shadow of His grace and goodness that would be more perfectly realized in Jesus.

In verse four we begin to see the character of Boaz displayed. What do we learn about him from the way he interacts with his servant and the reapers? **He greets them in the name of the Lord and pronounces a blessing on them and they return the greeting. In current language, Boaz was a Christian businessman.**

What do we learn of Boaz from verse five? **He is an older man. He speaks to his “young man” in charge of the reapers and inquires about the “young woman” gleaning. If we assume that Ruth is in her 20’s, he is likely a man in his 40’s or 50’s.**

What can we learn about Boaz from the way the foreman and the reapers treated her before Boaz arrived? **It is likely that Boaz has a reputation for kindness because the workers allowed her glean in Boaz’s fields. If Boaz was scrooge-like in business, the workers would have probably been afraid to allow her to glean.**

On a more practical level we see an example here of how a leader can set a tone amongst those who work for them. By being a godly and compassionate man, those who worked for Boaz were influenced and showed some degree of similar compassion. This is true in our homes, workplaces, and in our church. It is also true in our relationship with God. We love because He first loved us (*1 John 4:19*). The Lord has set the tone in our relationship and calls us to share the same compassion He has shown us.

What does the foreman note about Ruth as he answers Boaz’s question. **She was a diligent gleaner, working from early morning until the present time with only a short break. Her character was already starting to shine in the presence of others.**

Ruth 2:8-16 – The Kindness of God (Seen and Unseen)

As Boaz addresses Ruth, he blessed her in four distinct ways in verses 8-9. Identify those blessings and their significance.

1. She Can Stay. It is likely that gleaners weren't encouraged (or perhaps allowed) to tarry in one field very long. That wouldn't be a problem for Ruth.
2. She Can Glean in His Fields. Boaz likely had several fields and once the reapers completed the harvest in this field, they would move to another. By telling Ruth to "keep close to my young women," Boaz was telling her to show up at whatever field they were harvesting and she would be allowed to glean freely each day during the harvest season.
3. She Will be Safe. No doubt a poor, young widow like Ruth would be both easy prey for abuse by the workers. Boaz directed the men to act honorably toward her as an act of protection.
4. She May Drink from the Provided Vessels. There were probably not wells near the fields and any food and drink they had were carried in each day. Not only was Ruth allowed to glean in his fields each day, but she would also be allowed to drink from the vessels prepared and carried by his paid workers. This would allow Ruth to glean more freely and for a longer time.

Ruth responds to Boaz's kindness by falling prostrate upon the ground before Boaz and asking why he would even acknowledge a foreigner like her. Perhaps Ruth's low expectations come from Moabite culture or perhaps from things she had experienced thus far in Israel. Regardless, she was completely dumbfounded by Boaz.

Why would Boaz exhibit such kindness to Ruth? I believe there are three explicit and implicit reasons:

1. To Glorify God. Boaz is moved by Ruth's love and sacrifice for Naomi and recognizes that she has come to take refuge in the God of Israel. I believe Boaz's primary motivation was for Ruth to see that the God of Israel was a God of compassion and he could be the hands of God toward Ruth in this circumstance.
2. To Honor His Mother. (*Matthew 1:5, Joshua 2 and 6*). Boaz was raised by a woman who was a foreigner but had trusted herself to the God of Israel. No doubt his heart was softened to others like her.
3. To Honor His Relationship to Elimelech. As a kinsman to Elimelech, Ruth's kindness to Naomi was personal to him and by supporting Ruth he be supporting Naomi.

All of these reasons are good reasons and help us to better understand the kindness of this man.

Does Boaz see his kindness as sufficient to repay Ruth for her sacrifice? **No, he blesses her in the name of the Lord in verse 12 and invokes the Lord to repay her and give her a full reward.**

How does Boaz describe Ruth and the Lord in verse 12? What does this mean? **He portrays the Lord as a mother bird and Ruth as a baby bird born from a different mother, who comes to seek safety under the wings of the Lord. Boaz is being very purposeful to put Ruth's sacrifice into a spiritual context so that the Lord would be invoked to bless her and praised when He does. This is a beautiful image of the Lord's kindness (*hesed*).**

What is the impact of Boaz's kindness on Ruth described in verse 13? **She is comforted. The sacrifice she made was not without fear, doubt, or anxiety. Yet she still did it. But on this day, the Lord used Boaz to bring comfort to her spirit and give her hope of being accepted in this community.**

Ruth's humility is again displayed as she refers to herself as a "servant" to Boaz, though not worthy to even be a servant. In fact, the Hebrew word used for servant (*sipha*) describes the lowest rung on the social ladder. Ruth has abased herself before Boaz and magnifies his kindness.

Boaz goes even further now by inviting her to a meal, providing her bread and wine-vinegar, and then serving her roasted grain.

What is the significance of this gesture?

Sharing a meal with someone in Middle Eastern culture is a symbol of acceptance and fellowship. Ruth, a poor widowed foreign woman, is invited to join Boaz and his crew for lunch and he personally serves her food. She is being accepted and brought into fellowship with this community.



What connection do we see between Boaz's blessing on Ruth in verse 12 and the roasted grain left over after she was filled at lunch? See *Psalms 23:5*, *Luke 6:38* and *Ephesians 3:20*. **Boaz invoked the blessing of the Lord upon Ruth and we immediately begin to see evidence of this blessing. Who can out-give God? He blessed to abundance and provided for her more than she needed.**

After lunch Boaz gave two final instructions to his workers that were unknown to Ruth. She was to be allowed to glean among the sheaves (where more grain could be easily found) and they were also instructed to purposefully leave handfuls of grain stalks for her to collect without rebuke. Ruth knows about a portion of Boaz's kindness, but doesn't even realize all that he has done. What a picture for us of the Lord. **We witness many acts of His kindness but how many additional things does He do for us each day that escape our notice?**

There are many points of application to what we are studying. In Ruth, we see godly examples of humility, diligence, thanksgiving, and wisdom. In Boaz, we see godly examples of compassion, protection, generosity, and wisdom. When someone comes into the midst of our congregation, the assembly of the Lord, how do we treat them? When someone joins our church, how do we embrace them? When we have something to give, do we give it generously and willingly? Are we willing to go above and beyond in order to demonstrate the goodness and faithfulness of God? We are the body of Christ and each of us is an individual part of that body. **As you minister to others, He ministers to others; as you give, He gives.** I tell you with certainty that when you put yourself out there to show the love and kindness of God, He notices and He will repay you abundantly (*Matthew 10:39*). The Lord has only begun to show His goodness to Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz.

Ruth 2:17-23 – Hope Rekindled

We know from verse 7 that Ruth began gleaning in the “early morning” and with only a few breaks (including lunch), she continued gleaning in the field until evening. This was likely at least 10 hours of field work. Yet, her day was not done. She went to beat out (thresh) what she gleaned. Perhaps Boaz gave her access to his threshing floor to take advantage of the location and breeze. For the gleaner, they could not leave their barley in the fields because there would be no way to distinguish it from the field owner’s barley. They were forced to immediately thresh the grains they collected. Remember, gleaning was harder than reaping in the typical manner. The result of this hard day’s work was about an ephah of barley. Depending on the conversion used, her work product was between 30 to 50 pounds of barley grain. This was a very fruitful day for her.

After carrying the ephah of grain back to the city, Ruth enters the home shared with Naomi and Naomi immediately began asking questions and pronounced a blessing upon the man who showed her such kindness. Naomi recognized that Ruth had produced an amazing amount of grain from gleaning. As Ruth begins to answer Naomi’s questions, Naomi interjects a more specific blessing upon Boaz and pivots to make a surprising statement about the Lord. What does Naomi say? What does this mean? Why is this a surprise? **Naomi exclaims that the Lord has not forgotten the living or the dead. This is a reference to her family generally. After losing her husband and sons, we know that Naomi was deeply bitter and feels that the Lord turned completely against her. She now pronounces that the Lord’s kindness has not forsaken her family. This is a surprise because it is a stark contrast to her general disposition at the end of chapter one.**

Naomi states that the Lord’s kindness has not departed her family. “Kindness” is the translation of *hesed*, the Hebrew word used to describe covenant love, faithfulness, mercy, and other such attributes of the Lord. What does this blessing of grain through Boaz mean to Naomi? **Naomi sees this more than an act of simple kindness by Boaz. She sees this as a turning of a page spiritually. Whereas she was bitter in her perceived rejection by the Lord before, we see someone who now recognizes and rejoices in His blessing.**

In addition to recognizing the Lord’s faithfulness, Naomi makes an important observation regarding the significance of Ruth being blessed in Boaz’s field. What is it? **Boaz was a close relative and qualified to be a “redeemer” (kinsman redeemer) for their family. With this realization, Naomi’s mind begins to churn about the possibilities beyond the harvest.**

How important was it for Naomi to recognize the Lord’s hand in this circumstance? **Spiritually, it was essential. She did not explain away Ruth’s encounter with Boaz as mere chance. She knew the Lord’s hand was in it. Because of this, her joy became full and her confidence grew. We learn here an important lesson. To escape bitterness (and stay positive), we have to be willing to see and thankfully acknowledge God’s acts of kindness toward us.**

When Boaz offered to allow Ruth to glean in the fields until the end of harvest, the horizon of Ruth's hope extended from a moment to a month or more. For Naomi, this act of kindness cast the horizon of hope upon the rest of her life and began to change her drastically. After Ruth explains that Boaz's offer extend through the end of the harvest season, Naomi expresses her agreement that Ruth should remain in Boaz's fields for the sake of her safety. Read *Ruth 3:1-5*. How does this blessing impact Naomi's attitude and disposition towards Ruth? Although Naomi clearly loved Ruth, her expression of that love deepens from what appeared to be toleration to shepherding/nurturing. Naomi begins to watch out for Ruth and to practically love her as a mother rather than being consumed by her grief.

There are two important lessons we must learn from this. First, Naomi's weak hope and faith exhibited by returning to Israel with Ruth was beginning to be rewarded by the Lord and her hope was multiplied. This is an example of *Romans 5:3-5*, in which a tribulation produced a steadfastness that produced deeper character and yielded in a deep and satisfying hope. **When we are faithful to the Lord, even in our weakness, He will sustain our spiritual strength and bless us in immeasurable ways.**

Secondly, the seeds of love Ruth sowed in Naomi were finally beginning to grow and produce fruit and this fruit was a blessing in turn to Ruth. Ruth loved Naomi through her weakness and bitterness and now Naomi is turning a page and a life-changing blessing is about to flow back onto Ruth. **How often do we forfeit great blessings because we are unwilling to invest in others, despite the personal cost?**

Ruth continued to live with Naomi and to glean from Boaz's fields through the end of the barley and wheat harvest, which would have been a period of around four months.