

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Ruth: Does God really care about me?

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The Plot Thickens

Ruth 2

Introduction:

A. Dr. Rigsby's tragedy shows the possibility of anger at God

My very first week of college, I went to a Christian gathering and heard Dr. Rick Rigsby speak. At the time Dr. Rigsby taught at Texas A&M and served as chaplain for the football team. Although I heard him speak almost 15 years ago, it was one of those talks that stick with you. So, Dr. Rigsby shared about meeting his wife Trina and how lucky he felt when she agreed to marry him. Six years and two kids later, his beautiful wife found a lump in her breast. Like Naomi and Ruth, Dr. Rigsby's life was turned upside down as his wife underwent a lengthy, difficult battle with breast cancer. With tears in his eyes, Dr. Rigsby said, "I begged, repeatedly, to God to please not let my wife die. God did not answer my prayer as I wanted, and after Trina passed, I repeatedly shook my fist at God, in anger."

B. In tragedy we can wonder, "Does God really care about me?"

Now as a college freshman I think I understood, to some degree, the pain of Dr. Rigsby. But now that I've also been married six years, and we have our second child on the way, I think I understand a little better how crushing of a loss that must have been. And when that kind of pain is your constant companion, it can be tempting to wonder, "Does God really care about me?"

Today we're in the second week of a four part series covering the book of Ruth, which speaks to this pointed question, "Does God really care about me?" It's such an important topic. After all, when we're going through tragedy, who wants to add to the pain by disengaging from life and becoming sour towards God? So, if you've got a Bible, please turn to Ruth 2, Ruth 2. Ruth is the 8th book in the Bible, right after Judges. As you turn, I'd like to invite you to please join with me in praying for our Church Family this month as we cover such a difficult topic.

C. Review of Chapter 1

Now the book of Ruth has four chapters, each chapter is one act in the story. So imagine you're watching a four part TV miniseries on the book of Ruth. At the beginning of the second episode, a narrator hits some highlights from Ruth 1. That narrator could say, "Previously on Ruth. In the dark time of the Judges, a period of many rebellions by God's people, Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons leave Bethlehem because of famine. They find food and live among

the pagan Moabites, a questionable people who share a very checkered past with Israel. Elimelech and the sons die, leaving Naomi all alone – a poor, vulnerable widow whose family line may go extinct. Naomi returns home because God has provided His people with food. However, Naomi, who thinks God is against her, insists that her Moabite daughters-in-law return to their homes. So Orpah goes home, but Ruth displays incredibly loyal love as she commits to Naomi and her God, even though she'll probably struggle to keep food on the table, and be vulnerable to racism and abuse.

So, what will happen to vulnerable, bitter Naomi, who has lost her family and thinks God has cursed her? Does God really care about Naomi? And what of foreigner Ruth, who has seemingly thrown her entire future away to care for her bitter mother-in-law and follow God? Will God reward Ruth's loyal love?" Does the women's return right at harvest time signal a shift in their fortunes, or will they continue to suffer hardship and tragedy?"

I. The Development of the Plot – Ruth 2:1-23

A. The need for food and family – Ruth 2:1-2

So let's find out, as we cover act two of our story. Please follow along with me, as I read Ruth 2:1. "Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz." So the author introduces an intriguing new character. The meaning of the name "Boaz" is less clear than the names we covered from chapter 1, although some scholars believe it means, "in him is strength." Whether this is correct or not, the term "worthy man" (*gibbor hayil*) in this context suggests that Boaz had good wealth, reputation, and influence in the community.¹ And not only that, he is from Elimelech's clan, so he's a relative of Naomi's dead husband. Perhaps this Boaz will use his fullness to help the emptiness of Naomi and Ruth.

However, instead of immediately satisfying our curiosity, the narrator goes back to Naomi and Ruth. Please follow along with me as I read verse 2. "And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor.' And she said to her, 'Go, my daughter.'"

Now there was no welfare system back then, but God cared for the poor by providing provision in His Law. It said that you must leave any food that you happen to drop when harvesting so that the poor could pick it up. It also said that you must reap in a circle, which means that the corners of their rectangular fields were also left with food for the poor. However,

¹ Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT, 133.

in the dark period of the Judges, a young foreign woman looking to find food might instead find someone looking to take advantage of her. However, Ruth knows that she and Naomi need food, so she displays her loyal love as she goes out, despite the risks.

Now in addition to food, Naomi and Ruth also really need family, which was extremely important in that culture. We see Naomi's need for family in chapter 1, as is left all alone – no husband, no kids, and no grandkids. However, Ruth also needs family. She has lost her husband, has no kids, and has chosen to never return to her family in Moab. Ruth is even more isolated than Naomi, as she's now living as the foreigner. And it's interesting that the narrator keeps highlighting that Ruth is a Moabite. We learn this back when she's introduced in verse 4 of chapter 1, but the narrator mentions it again in 1:22, and here in 2:2, and also in 2:6, 2:10-11, and 2:21. Perhaps the author is highlighting Ruth's isolation from Israelite society at this point, and also her vulnerability as she goes to search for food.

B. The “chance” encounter that provides physical provision – Ruth 2:3-17

Let's see how the search goes, starting in verse 3. “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.” The narrator, with tongue-in-cheek, tells us that Ruth just “happened” to find the field of Boaz. One commentator, Dr. Robert Hubbard Jr., notes that in those days the fields were located outside the city and did not have visible fences. Further, sometimes an individual would own multiple fields that did not touch each other.² As a result, a brand new foreigner would not know whose field she was in as she searched for food.

Now let's look at verse 4, and see who just “happened” to stop by. “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 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.’”

² Ibid, 138.

The coincidences grow – not only did Ruth just “happen” to go to Boaz’s field, but it just so “happens” that Boaz is there; and he just so “happens” to greet his workers in the name of the LORD, suggesting he is a godly man; and it just so “happens” that he provides Ruth abundant food, protection, and water. Now Ruth has suffered a great deal, and perhaps you have too. We aren’t always able to see it, but God is also at work behind the scenes in our lives.

Now Boaz goes well beyond the requirements of God’s Law, which is probably why Ruth responds as she does, starting in verse 10. “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 foreigner?’ 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!’”

Imagine the relief felt by Ruth, who probably started the day just hoping to avoid harassment and find a meager amount of food. Now she has wealthy Boaz providing for her and assuring her as he says, “I’m being so nice to you because you’ve taken care of my family and left your gods to adopt the true God. Further, I’m asking God to reward you richly for the incredible sacrifice and commitment that you’ve shown.”

Now let’s see how Boaz plays a part in showing God’s care for Ruth, and Naomi, as he continues his generosity over the next few verses. Look at verse 13 with me. “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.’”

Now Ruth started chapter 2 as an isolated foreigner, but now she’s getting a little connected to Israelite society. Boaz has given her a place to glean food and drink water, he’s invited her to work among his workers, and he’s given her protection. Look again at verse 13, where Ruth describes herself as like one of Boaz’s servants. Interestingly the term “servant” (*sipha*) here is the one for a female servant who is not eligible for marriage. It’s a low rung on society’s ladder, but it’s a part of society and a start.

Now look at verse 14 with me. “And at mealtime Boaz said to her, ‘Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine.’ So she sat behind 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 Boaz here continues to show Ruth favor as he provides her with a cooked meal, which she eats among his servants, and as he instructs his workers to not only avoid harassing her, but to help Ruth gather extra food as she works. Let’s examine Ruth’s haul by looking at verse 17. “So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley.” Now that’s about 30 pounds of food. Dr. Hubbard notes that documents from this time period suggest that female agriculture workers typically received 30 pounds of food for working an entire month, so Ruth has collected an entire month’s wages in one day!³ And Ruth has been invited to continue working in Boaz’s field throughout the harvest. Ruth and Naomi’s pressing need for food has been satisfied.

C. Naomi’s response to the provision – Ruth 2:18-23

So Ruth carries her haul back into the city to Naomi, whose curiosity is greatly peaked. Look at verse 19. “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 worked 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.’”

Naomi’s response here suggests that she is giving God a second chance. Perhaps He does care about Naomi after all, as He works behind the scenes through the love of Ruth and the generosity of Boaz. And it’s an expression of God’s grace. For God does not wait for Naomi to repent of her bitterness and then provide for her. God starts to deliver Naomi even while she’s bitter, for Naomi’s attitude towards God only seems to improve as her circumstances do.

Look again at verse 20. Here Naomi notes the “kindness” of Boaz, and ultimately God, as she uses the Hebrew word *hesed*, a key term in the book. It means “loyal love”. And in verse 20 we see Naomi say that God’s kindness through Boaz is now again resting on the living, Ruth and herself. And not only that, perhaps the dead might be blessed. For Naomi notes that Boaz is one of their closest relatives, and could serve as a “redeemer.”

³ Ibid, 179. Hubbard quoting the study of I. J. Gleb found in *JNES* 24 [1965].

Now what does Naomi mean by this? The book of Leviticus describes the “redeemer” as one who took care of needy family members. He would do things like repurchase family land that was sold out of economic necessity and redeem a relative whose hardship had led to selling themselves into slavery.⁴ The book of Deuteronomy, in chapter 25, does not directly use the term “redeemer” but appears to describe an even stronger form of care for a needy family member. Here God’s Law commands the brother of a deceased man to marry his brother’s widow and raise a son in his name. This was a financial sacrifice because the living brother had to take on the expense of raising a child, a child who would be considered the dead man’s child, continue the dead man’s family name, and inherit the dead man’s part of the Promised Land. It’s hard for us to fully understand, but in a culture where women were very dependent upon the care of a man and it was vitally important for the family line to continue, this law reflects God’s care for the poor, childless widow.

Now Boaz was not the brother to Ruth’s dead husband, so it does not appear he was obligated by the Law to this deep of a “redeemer” commitment. But given the significant work that God has already done on behalf of the widows, and given the godliness and generous spirit of Boaz, he just might be willing to redeem and marry Ruth. The author seems to be setting us up for this expectation. He or she started the chapter by saying Boaz is a relative, but here at the end of the chapter highlights that Boaz is a close relative. Further, the author has described both Ruth and Boaz as people of *hesed*, so they seem like a good match. Now if Boaz and Ruth married and had a son, that son would continue the family line of Elimelech and Naomi, and once he grew up, he could support both Naomi and Ruth if something happened to Boaz.

But before we get too far ahead of ourselves, let’s finish chapter two. Please look with me at verse 21. “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.’”

Now earlier in the chapter, Boaz instructs Ruth to stay close to his young women and follow after his young men, who were supposed to help Ruth. Now here in verse 21, Ruth highlights keeping close to the men. Look at how Naomi responds in verse 22. “It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted.”

Dr. Chisholm, a Hebrew professor of mine, helped me see that in verse 22 Naomi instructs Ruth to stay by the young *women*, not the young men, as Ruth had said. Now it’s

⁴ Cf. Leviticus 25.

possible that Naomi just thought that Ruth would be safer by the women. However, given that she's just mentioned Boaz as a possible "redeemer", perhaps Naomi is also subtly suggesting to Ruth that she focus on Boaz, not the younger men. Look now at the beginning of verse 23, which shows that Ruth takes Naomi's advice. "So she kept close to the young women of Boaz."

Now verses 1 through 22 cover a single day, during which God greatly improved the situation of Ruth and Naomi. However, although their need for food has been met and Ruth has earned the favor of Boaz, verse 23 conveys the passage of time. For chapter 2 starts at the beginning of the barley harvest, but verse 23 concludes as the wheat harvest wraps up. So almost two months have passed, and as verse 23 tells us, Ruth continues to live with Naomi, implying that Boaz has not offered to redeem Ruth in marriage. Now with the harvest ending, Ruth no longer has a reason to come to Boaz's field, and given the norms of that culture around a single woman visiting a man, it's quite possible that Ruth may not have contact with Boaz for a while. Further, in verse 21 the narrator reminds us yet again that Ruth is still Ruth the Moabite, not Ruth the Israelite.

So, as Naomi observes what's taking place, she hatches a radical plan that might offend our Bible belt sensitivities. Next week we'll see what comes of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, as we continue to wrestle with the question, "Does God really care about me?" I hope you'll be here as we move toward the resolution of the story, especially if the pain of Naomi and Ruth has hit close to home.

II. Application

A. Reminder of last Sunday's application (Naomi)

Until then, could you identify with any of our characters? Last week we focused on Naomi, as we encouraged anyone struggling to believe that God cares to seek the help of a "Ruth-like" friend. We also considered God's care for us as we heard Gail share a stirring testimony of God's care in the midst of an ongoing hardship. If you weren't here last week, you should download the message on Northwest's website and listen to the part where Gail shares her testimony, especially if you feel like Naomi. And if you do identify with Naomi, I hope you'll continue to look for a "Ruth" who can help, and also consider anew God's care for you.

B. Perhaps, like Ruth, God wants you to show His care to someone in need

Now as we consider how to apply chapter 2, we shift our focus to Ruth. Perhaps, like Ruth, you're dealing with significant hardships. Now we're all limited and can't radically devote ourselves to everyone, especially when struggling with our own pain. And sometimes it's even

unloving to help someone who has created their own problems and needs to take responsibility for their life. However, perhaps this week God wants you to allow Him to work through you as you care for someone whose pain you can identify with and minister to, a Naomi in your life. Not to give trite answers or unsolicited advice, but to be there for them and serve them in their need - to be a means through which God cares.

Or perhaps God is prompting you this morning to care for someone in need, even if you don't identify with their pain. At the beginning of chapter 2 Ruth doesn't have much; all she can do is risk her own safety as she tries to get a little food for Naomi. And so perhaps God wants you to emulate Ruth as you take a risk this week to serve someone in need. As I've studied the passage this week, I've been challenged to consider if I'm really showing the kind of *hesed* that Ruth does, a love that is truly sacrificial, and at times even risky, as it places the needs of others above your own.

Conclusion:

A. A primary way God shows His care is by providing friends who care

For in this broken, painful world, our families desperately need people of *hesed*, our friends need people of *hesed*, our schools need people of *hesed*, our places of work need people of *hesed*, our community needs people of *hesed*. For there are so many going through dark times, and in those times it's easy to wonder, "Does God really care about me?" And one of the primary ways that God shines His care in that darkness is by providing friends who care.

B. Dr. Rick Rigsby's story shows that God can mold us into friends who care

Now at the beginning of the message we left Dr. Rigsby in his time of darkness. He had lost his young wife, and was shaking his fist at God in anger. But, thankfully, with tears in his eyes, Dr. Rigsby said that he used his other hand to hold on tight to God. By God's grace, he kept trusting in the darkness that God still cared. Now God didn't provide in the way that he wanted, but Dr. Rigsby shared that God always provided. He shared that Jesus, who suffered all so that one day we won't suffer, He never left Dr. Rigsby's side. And it made all the difference. Satan wanted this trial to destroy Dr. Rigsby. But, as he held onto God's hand, God created a rebuilt life that's reached thousands with the powerful message that hope can always be found in Jesus. God has worked through Dr. Rigsby as He worked through Ruth thousands of years ago, sharing *hesed* with others in their time of need.

And if you're in a real time of need this morning, I've been praying for you and believe that you don't really want bitterness about life and God to take over. By God's grace, today

could start a new journey in your life; one that leads to a beautiful testimony of grabbing hold of God's hand again, and encouraging someone else in need to do the same. For God really cares, and provides people who care. Let's pray now to the God who cares...

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.