

Chance? Not a Chance!

Ruth 2

A Irishman is sitting at the bar in his local pub, when another man moves over from his stool and says, "I miss my village and long to see the wind-swept shores of my childhood home."

Our guy says "Where are you from, my friend?"

"That wonderful town made by God's own hands, Killarney."

"Is that right!" says our man. "I, too, am a child of Killarney! I did my schooling at St. Mary's of the Sacred Heart - finished in 1957. Where did you attend?"

"I went to St. Mary's as well! I graduated in 1957. When did you graduate, friend?"

A woman who overhears all this says to the bartender, "Isn't that the most amazing series of coincidences?"

Says the bartender, "Pay no attention to the Johnson twins when they're drinking."

Some people put a lot of stock in coincidences and luck. As believers, we probably ought to train ourselves to look at the events of our lives more in terms of divine purpose. That's a challenge at times. It's hard to appreciate some "upper-level sense of it all" when I get into the check-out line where either a new cashier is being trained or some item from the deepest bowels of the store needs a price check. It's hard to imagine what great and wonderful thing God might have in mind when I get into the shortest line at a bank's drive-up window only to watch six cars pass me by one line over. What act of providence is at work when I am waiting to pay for gas behind some guy buying lottery tickets? Nevertheless, the Bible teaches that God is purposefully engaged in our world. Our hairs are numbered. No sparrow that falls to the ground escapes His gaze. Little events *DO* matter

Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth did not escape God's gaze even after their lives had been touched by bitter grief. Naomi's husband, an Israelite from Bethlehem, had moved his wife and two sons to Moab in order to escape a famine. The boys married Moabite girls. When the father and both sons had died, Ruth, one of the Moabite daughters-in-law, pledged her allegiance to the God of Israel and returned with her mother-in-law to Bethlehem after the famine had subsided. Life ahead was not promising. With no husbands or children to care for them, Ruth and Naomi's futures appeared bleak. But then, the author introduces his second chapter with a hint of promise:

¹Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz.

Naomi knew who Boaz was, but she did not return to Bethlehem expecting anything from him. He was a relative, but not one with legal obligations toward her. He was a "man of standing" in Israel and he had a few years on Ruth, who was from Moab anyway, so prospects for romance seemed far-fetched. Still, the narrative depicts their lives intersecting, depicting the events almost as coincidences. But, were these really chance encounters? With *YAHWEH* involved, not a chance.

I. Ruth's Initiative (2-4)

A. Ruth Makes the Most of a Bad Situation verses 2, 3a

²And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor."

Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." ³So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters ...

The options for women in such dire straits were limited. They could beg. They could sell themselves as indentured slaves. Some resorted to prostitution. Gleaning in the field of a landowner, hopefully a kind one, seemed the best option to Ruth. After reapers took down the standing grain, servants, often women, would gather the stalks of grain into bundles. Only then, could “gleaners” gather for their own use anything that was left on the ground. Gleaning was not employment. It was a benevolence program spelled out in the Law intended to aid the poor.

⁹ “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God. – Leviticus 19:9, 10

No one got rich gleaning, but the practice was a reflection of the kindness and mercy toward the poor and the alien that was written into the Law. Ruth was both poor and alien. The first chapter of Ruth makes it quite clear that Ruth was from Moab and yet, several times, she will be referred to as the “Moabitess”. The author seems to want to keep her down-and-out status before us.

Of course, just because the Law made provision for the poor, this was still the age of the judges. There was no king, no covenant enforcer, and whenever the Law was on a back-burner in Israel, the rich tended to brutalize the poor. In other words, not every landowner was cooperative. Some resented the program and treated the gleaners harshly, even violently. Ruth understood this, which is why she was looking for someone “in whose eyes I find favor.” She was not looking for sparks, fireworks or romance, just a landowner who honored the Law and had a soft spot for the poor.

B. Could Ruth Have Possibly Seen God’s Hand at Work? verses 3b, 4

... As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.

⁴ Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, “The LORD be with you!”
“The LORD bless you!” they called back.

On the earthly plane, the storyteller is deliberate in letting us know that Ruth “stumbled into” gleaning in a field belonging to Boaz. The Hebrew translated, “As it turned out, she found herself” is literally rendered, “her chance chanced,” or, she happened to happen on.” And, not only was she lucky enough to find a nice landowner, she also found a nice place to work. Boaz blessed his workers invoking the name of *YAHWEH*, and they responded to him in kind. We get the sense that this was a typical exchange between Boaz and his regular workforce.

Ruth had a sense of God’s kindness, but not necessarily that He had some bigger plan in mind. Sometimes, we are thankful for blessings that God bestows, but our gratitude is not always seated in the idea that God is working out something bigger. This sense of God’s purposefulness is useful, especially when He does not answer our petitions just as we prayed them. However He answers our prayers, we benefit from knowing that God is always working out His good purposes.

“The suggestion that Ruth’s encounter with Boaz was by blind chance is offset by the emphasis throughout the story on God’s providential guidance. From the perspective of Ruth and Boaz, the meeting was accidental, but not from God’s perspective.

- F.B. Huey, Jr.

II. Boaz' Interest (5-16)

A. Ruth Caught Boaz' Eye

Boaz saw Ruth and asked his foreman, "Whose young woman is that?" She seemed out of place amongst the gleaners. He does not ask her name but about her kinship. Who is responsible for her? His question implies interest, but not necessarily romantic interest, so much as a paternal one. He addresses her as "My daughter" which also indicates an age difference between the two. Boaz learns that this is the Moabitess who came to Bethlehem with Naomi, that she asked very politely to glean in this field and that she has worked hard, all day, with only one tiny break."

All these things awaken in Boaz a sense of admiration for Ruth. He told her to continue gleaning in his field only. These were dangerous times. Boaz could insure her safety if she remained with his workers. They were under orders not to molest her, but he could not guarantee her safety in some other man's field. He also told her to help herself to the servant's water. No other gleaner would expect that. Ruth was grateful, but a bit confused. Ruth was a stranger to Boaz, but he seemed to know her, and care for her. How was this possible? It turns out Boaz that had heard of her.

Why did Boaz so admire Ruth? She was humble. I'm sure her work ethic seized his attention. But, what really impressed him was her faith and courage. Though he had not met her, he had heard of this young lady that has sacrificed so much to accompany her mother-in-law to a strange land. And he especially admired her faith and trust in Israel's God, He said to her:

... ¹²May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

B. Boaz Steps Up His Generosity

At lunch time, Boaz invited Ruth over to the little shelter where his workmen and servants shared a meal. Ruth had already thanked Boaz for treating her, a gleaner, so kindly even though she did not have "the standing" of even the servant girls. But now, he was giving her a place among those folks that regularly worked for him. She dipped bread in "wine vinegar" or sour wine, which the ancients found particularly refreshing when working outdoors. The he gave her roasted grain, and after she put away every bite she could, he let her take home a doggy bag.

The point of gleaning was to pick up any grain that dropped after the reapers and bundlers had made their pass through the field. Boaz also gave Ruth the freedom to glean extra close to the bundles and to pick up any grain that fell from them. He even told his men to pull some stalks of grain out of the bundles and leave them for her to gather. And, they were to never say anything to scold or embarrass her. Boaz was extending mercy to Ruth, but he was also protecting her dignity from anyone who might feel inclined to say something. Boaz was insuring that Ruth secured a haul rather than meager snippets of grain.

C. Could Boaz Have Recognized God's Hand in All This?

All we know from the narrative is that Boaz was extending kindness to a woman of strong character who needed a hand. Perhaps, the fact that he was a relative of Ruth's deceased husband factored into his desire to help her out. We are not privy as to why a "man of standing" like Boaz was available. Perhaps, he too was widowed. But, whether Boaz could see it or not, God was orchestrating these events to continue his name in Israel. And, of course, his would not be just any old genealogical line in Israel. In three brief generations, from Boaz and Ruth, would come Israel's greatest king, the man after God's heart, David. Eventually, this gentle man and his Moabite wife would appear in the genealogy of the greatest King ever, Jesus the Christ.

When David ascended the throne, it would seem as if he had appeared from nowhere. Jesse had many sons, but God, for whatever reason, had chosen to anoint the youngest. Perhaps, the story of Ruth is included in the canon of scripture in part to remind us that God is not a God of accident, coincidence and happenstance. He is purposeful in all that He does. David hardly appeared out of thin air. God purposefully raised up a man with a noble, albeit modest legacy:

Ruth, Boaz, Naomi, David – all these were called by God for the same remarkable purpose. Eventually, God desired to redeem a people back to Himself through the atoning work of Jesus.

III. Naomi's Intuition (17-23)

A. Naomi Saw that Ruth Had Stumbled into a Windfall verses 17-19a

¹⁷So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. ¹⁸She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough.

¹⁹Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!"

To thresh the grain she had gleaned, Ruth likely went to a threshing floor, an elevated flat place where she could beat the grain with a stick or a rock and rely on the wind to blow away the waste material. A typical gleaner would be fortunate to secure a few ounces of grain in a day. This ephah of grain that Ruth collected, depending on the measuring chart referenced, weighed anywhere from 29 to 50 pounds. Naomi must have been a little shocked as her daughter-in-law lugged home a haul of grain that would last the two women for weeks. Of course, they didn't have to tear into that grain right away. Ruth presented Naomi with the doggy bag from lunch.

Of course, Naomi immediately knew that there was more to all this than met the eye. This large quantity of grain could not be explained by a simple "good day of gleaning." Ruth had begun her day hoping to find someone who would extend favor to her. Naomi asked, perhaps more like a girlfriend than a mother-in-law, "So, who was he? Who did you meet? In whose field did you glean?"

B. Did Naomi's Mental Wheels Begin to Spin? verses 19b-23

Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said.

²⁰"The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers."

²¹Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.'"

²²Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed."

²³So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

Naomi was delighted to hear the name of Boaz. The idea that his kindness extended to “the living and the dead” was almost certainly a suggestion that he felt some responsibility to Ruth’s deceased husband, his own relative, and that this factored in part into his concern for Ruth.

Naomi identifies Boaz as a “close relative” and a “kinsman-redeemer.” As a kinsman-redeemer, he could marry Ruth in order to carry on the name of Mahlon, her deceased husband. He was not required to do so since he was not Mahlon’s brother, but he could. He could also purchase members of the family out of indentured servanthood. Also, he had the right to redeem any property that Elimelech, Naomi’s deceased husband might have had to sell in order to make ends meet. (As it turned out, there was such a piece of property.) In short, a kinsman-redeemer had the status to change the station of lives that were broken, lost or enslaved. The riveting question was: Boaz could play kinsman-redeemer, but would he? Tune in for future episodes to find out.

Whether the wheels of an impending marriage were spinning in Naomi’s imagination or not, she knew that it was wise for Ruth to accept Boaz’s offer to stay near his servant girls, if only for her safety. And so, the chapter concludes, noting that Ruth continued gleaning in the fields of Boaz, but with special perks. At night, she would return to Naomi. This arrangement continued for the duration of the barley harvest and through the wheat harvest, a period of about seven weeks.

C. Did Naomi Recognize God’s Hand?

Whether romance was to bloom or not, Naomi had a little less than two months to watch things play out. It wasn’t that long ago that she had told the women of Bethlehem, “Call me Mara” which means “bitter” because her life had been marked by unspeakable tragedy. If she felt His hand then, is it possible that she now sensed that things might soon be looking up by His grace?

As readers of the story of *Ruth*, many hundreds of years after it all took place; we have the advantage of many more scriptural assurances about the faithfulness of God on which to draw than did Naomi, Boaz or Ruth. We have seen God at work in history, time and again, bringing His eternal purposes to pass. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz may have been sensing a blessing from *YAHWEH*, but could they know that they were part of a much greater drama and a much greater love story that God has been bringing to pass since the foundations of the earth were laid?

We have a vantage point that assures us that God wanted to bring into all of our lives an even greater Kinsman-Redeemer than Boaz could ever be – One Who can restore meaning to meaningless lives, One Who can shelter us from greater dangers than we can see with natural eyes and One Who can buy us back from slavery, not a slavery to mere poverty, but a slavery to sin.

Whether or not these gentle characters of ancient Bethlehem could see beyond the good or bad fortune of the moment, their story reminds the rest of us that life is not about good fortune, bad fortune, coincidence or luck. In all things, God is working out His good purposes. He is fashioning His people into the likeness of His Son. Do you believe that God is shaping you into the likeness Of Jesus through every event, every experience you encounter, the good times as well as the difficult times? You can, if you will yield to the kindness of the great Kinsman-Redeemer.

When we do this and trust Him in all things, we have a capacity to remain grounded in times of great blessing as well as calm, even joyful in the face of our greatest challenges.