

Faithful Obedience and God's Providence

SCOTT HOEZEE

I once saw a play on Broadway that had a dramatic ending to the first act. In the play, a famous mathematician had died but had left behind a hugely important proof that shook up the math world. People were not sure how he could have written it before he died. The dead man's daughter was the lead character in the play, and as the first act ended, she said she knew all about her father's famous proof. "How so?" someone asked. "Because I wrote it," she says. But the moment she says that, and just before the lights go out, her dead father appears at a doorway just behind his daughter. What a setup for the second act! But something like that also happens at the end of Ruth 1. It is a tragic ending, as Naomi declares herself to be an empty and bitter woman shot through with loss; but then the chapter ends with these words: the barley harvest was beginning. So, as Naomi and Ruth walk off the stage, you can hear kernels of grain crunching beneath their feet, and that is the sound of hope.

Today on *Groundwork*, we will explore Ruth 2, and see how and why this hope plays out. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, this is program two of a four-part series on the well-known Old Testament book of Ruth. It has four chapters and we are going to take one chapter for each of our four programs, and this is the second one. We looked in the first program at the story: Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, and their two boys moved to Moab because there was a famine in Bethlehem—a famine in Judah. They go to Moab to find life and find only death. Elimelech dies, the two boys get married, but then they die in short order, and so Naomi is left a widow with two widowed daughters-in-law. She goes back home—the famine has ended in Israel, so she goes back home...tries to ditch the daughters-in-law...tries to say: Stay here. You have a much better shot at life in your home country. The daughter-in-law Orpah says: Okay, see you later; but Ruth says: I am not going anywhere; and so the two return to Bethlehem, but Naomi is a broken woman; and her name, Naomi, means pleasant, but when the townsfolk come out and say: Welcome home, Naomi; she says: Don't call me pleasant, call me bitter. My name is Mara now because I have nothing, and the Lord has dealt me a very, very bitter and bad hand.

DAVE BAST

Life has turned from sweet to bitter for her, right; and you know, you can view this story, on the one hand, from God's perspective, and say he is in control, you know; he is taking them through these terrible experiences of loss, but he will be with them and he will bless them; and that is all true; but you can also turn around and view it right from the ground, from the human perspective, and see that everything that happens in this story depends on human beings making choices.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and for Naomi and Ruth, they are...from a ground level, as you just said, Dave...they are in as bad a situation as you could be in...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the ancient world. You know, we always hear about the three most vulnerable classes of people that God was always concerned about: Widows, orphans, and foreigners. Ruth has at least two of those three strikes against her. She is a foreigner and she is a widow; and you know, in those days there was no Social Security. You couldn't get food stamps. As a woman in a male dominated society, she couldn't go get a job at McDonald's or the local Wal-Mart or something. The only thing Naomi and Ruth could do was to rely on the social safety net God had put into place; and for them, that is going to be the gleaner law.

DAVE BAST

Right; but even before that can happen, the key thing that happens in Chapter 1 is, Ruth decides to commit herself to Naomi.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Now, if that hadn't happened...if Ruth had taken a hike along with Orpah, Naomi really would be bitter and bereft, and left with nothing. She would be living there as an old woman all alone on the charity of her whatever distant relatives were there; but because Ruth is with her and is still young and strong and healthy, they can actually do something about their predicament when they get back to Bethlehem; and as you say, that has to do with the law that the Lord had given providing for the practice of gleaning.

Here it is from the book of Leviticus, Chapter 23:22: (God says) When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the alien.

There are two of the three that you mentioned: Poor, alien—foreigner, widow. "I am the Lord your God," at the end of that law. So, there is the idea.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, the idea was, farmers were not supposed to vacuum their fields clean. You know, today we might say: What a waste. You left all those potatoes on the edge of the field and you left all that...two whole rows of wheat that you didn't harvest? What a waste. But no, today it might be a waste, but then it was the social safety net God put into place. This is the only way that the poor would live. If the farmers took everything out of their fields, people would starve—the poor would starve. So, that is what they are banking on. Ruth is going to go out. The barley harvest is beginning; that is how Chapter 1 ended, with that note of hope: Oh, wait; there is food being harvested, and if somebody somewhere in Israel is faithful to God and leaves some food in the field, maybe Ruth and Naomi have a shot; and they do, because here is what we read next in Ruth 2.

²And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go, my daughter." ³And so, she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers, and as it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. ⁸And Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter; do not go glean in another field, or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. ⁹Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you.

DAVE BAST

If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." ¹⁰Then Ruth fell prostrate with her face to the ground and said to Boaz, "Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me when I am a foreigner?" ¹¹But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹²May the Lord reward you

for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

I love that.

DAVE BAST

A beautiful statement, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and I love the line in verse 3, where I think the narrator here is winking at us like crazy: As it happened, she came to the field of Boaz...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the narrator is going: It didn't just happen. God's providence is kicking in here and she is going to get to exactly the right field owned by exactly the right person in the wider family of Elimelech, and guess what? He is a very good and a kind person, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes, when we are first told about him, I think he is described as a worthy man. So yes, as you say, Scott, there are a lot of “just happened to's” in this story. She just happens to go to this field and Boaz just happens to notice her, and it just so happens that he has been told the story of how Ruth has chosen to commit herself to Naomi and come back, and...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And so, all of those happenings, you know, under the watchful eye of a God who cares and who is going to see that this story turns out well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And yet, none of it would be working out so well if Boaz did not do the very simple thing of following God's law. That little act of faithfulness makes all the difference in the world in this story; and you know, it is often true in our lives, too. The little things we do God can use to do great things.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, people are people; and one of the things that strikes me as I read this story again, and maybe read it a little more closely than you just kind of skim it when you are going through the Bible, is that gleaning must have been a little bit of a chancy undertaking for women...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because there are these repeated references: Look, Boaz says, you stay close to the women in this field, and I have told my guys they are not supposed to molest you or bother you in any way; and later Naomi is going to tell her, you know, be careful. Make sure you go there, because presumably every field was not safe; and every landowner did not care all that much about the poor. It was very possible that you could be shut out,

you could be pursued, you could be harmed in some way...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So, you are right; Boaz is a righteous guy, and...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he is doing the right thing.

DAVE BAST

Just obey, you know? Just do what you know God wants you to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just do the right thing; but there seems to be maybe a little extra spark between Ruth and Boaz...

DAVE BAST

Oh, boy!

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as the story moves on, we will see where that goes; and we will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are in Ruth 2...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The second program of this four-part series, and you were just mentioning, Dave, that it is an unpleasant fact, but in the ancient world, and well, frankly it is probably true in lots of parts of the world, maybe most parts of the world today, too; a woman out on her own like this was vulnerable—vulnerable to rape, vulnerable to getting beaten up, accosted—who knows what; and Ruth is a *foreign* woman, which might even tempt people even more...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To take advantage of her; so, the faithfulness of Boaz that we were just talking about, and the extra protection that he surrounds her with, basically saying: You touch her you are going to deal with me. This is also the hand of God in preserving Ruth's life.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, we know already about him that he is righteous in the ordinary sense—in the sense of he loves God's Word, loves God's law, is determined to run his business according to what is right; but he has also

got a tender heart and he is compassionate and he takes pity on this poor foreigner, Ruth. He has already heard some good things about her, as we just learned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, her reputation preceded her.

DAVE BAST

And now we are going to learn one more thing about him; he is generous. So, we read this in Ruth 2:14: At mealtime...so, lunch comes—lunch break...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Boaz said to her, “Come here and eat some of this bread and dip your morsel in the sour wine.” So she sat beside the reapers and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied and she had some left over. ¹⁵When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, “Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. ¹⁶You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.” ¹⁷So she gleaned in the field until evening.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Ruth is having a very good gleaning day...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is going to go really, really well. She is not going to come home with a little brown paper sack full of grain. She is going to have to lug it in a rucksack on her back, or something. Boaz is being very, very generous; but you know...but we also know that he is also seeing...I think he is falling in love with this woman. It is very clear this is a love story. We know that, but you know, you have to wonder what was going through the minds of Boaz's men when he invites her, a foreign widow woman, to join them for lunch...and what, she has these dirty Moabite fingers, and she is dipping her bread into the same bowl they have to dip their bread into. I mean, I am guessing there were some snickers among the men, thinking: Old Boaz has taken quite a shine to her, hasn't he? Or: What is wrong with him that he would contaminate our meal with this foreign woman? I mean, I am guessing that what Boaz did here was generous and hospitable, and it probably didn't sit well with some of the other people, but he did it anyway.

DAVE BAST

He did it; and just this beautiful illustration of, let's call it generous hospitality. The New Testament, as you may know, mentions hospitality as one of the gifts of the Spirit, and...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it comes up a lot.

DAVE BAST

It does; and you know, we think: what is the big deal? You invite somebody over for a meal...no, hospitality really is a big deal because you open your home, you open your life, you share what you have with others, especially if it is hospitality for a stranger or a foreigner; someone...you know...not necessarily part of your family. It is a beautiful thing, and when Boaz does this, it shows a kind of a genuine openness; really, frankly, a godlikeness in his character.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, that is right. I mean, one of the things that theologians have traditionally said was that there is a sense in which the entire act of creation in the first place for God was a hospitable act. He made room for us, right? God didn't need anybody else. I mean, God is God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit didn't need anything, but God decided to share his life with a whole universe of creatures; and so, when God created the universe, what he was doing was he was clearing out room. He was making space. It was finally an act of creation hospitality, and as you just said, Dave, Boaz is kind of being a chip off the old divine block here, as is anybody who is hospitable; and in the New Testament, one of the reasons it comes up so much is that those who accepted Jesus in this world also made room for the Son of God, because a lot of people didn't; but if you accept Jesus, then you are being hospitable to the very Son of God, who is kind of the ultimate stranger in our midst, even as Ruth is a stranger in the midst of the Israelites here.

DAVE BAST

Right; so Boaz not only treats her to lunch and has her join the circle of workers there and dip into the dish, he then says to the workers as they go back, as they break up after lunch: Now look, you make sure that you drop a few in front of her, you know, just so that she is going to get her fill. The word that suddenly popped into mind as I thought about Boaz here was philanthropist; he is a philanthropist; and again, there is a connection with God as well because that word means a lover of humans—a lover of people—and that is exactly what God is; so Boaz is simply exercising his divine creatureliness in imitation of the divine creator.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I even like how he says...and if you have any doubt that Boaz has indeed taken quite a shine to this Moabite woman, I also like how he said: You know what? Even if she goes into the part that we are going to harvest, but haven't harvested yet...the standing sheaves...let her go. Don't rebuke her; don't tell her: Hey, get out of the way. We haven't even gotten to that part yet. He said: No, just let her take...let her take everything she wants, is basically what he is saying.

So, here again, the barley here—the wheat and the barley and the grain—it is the stuff of life, right? We were noticing in the first chapter that Naomi and Elimelech were from Bethlehem, which in Hebrew Bethlehem means the house of bread; but it had no bread, that is why they went to Moab during the famine and the drought; but now, they are back, and now suddenly Bethlehem is a house of bread again. It is going to be a source of life. It is becoming, on this very first day of gleaning for Ruth—day one—it is becoming a source of life again.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so, Ruth, as you said, Scott, is going to have a really good day in the gleaning business; and she is going to come home with this overflowing bag full of grain; and Naomi will look at this and begin to put two and two together.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Naomi is beginning to sense how things are turning around for her and for Ruth, and we will look at her reaction in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and our look at Ruth 2; and we just said, Dave, that Boaz has made sure that Ruth is coming home with a whole heaping amount of barley and wheat and grain. I am guessing that the whole day that Ruth was gone...I am guessing that Naomi was back home maybe praying for her; and I am also guessing that given the string of really bad luck, if you want to put it that way, that she has endured...I am guessing Naomi half expected Ruth to come home beaten

up or raped or maybe she would come home with just a teeny little bit of grain and they would make one dinner roll out of it and they would have to split it for dinner that night. I am guessing that Naomi is thinking: Yeah, I am bitter. My life is really, really, really swirling down the drain of late; so, she doesn't have high expectations for Ruth's first day, but then...

DAVE BAST

So, when she gets back with all of this food...and by the way, again, Naomi did not know where she was going to end up...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nobody did, right?

DAVE BAST

Right; she just went out and it just so happened that she picked Boaz's field, but Naomi didn't know that was where she was working. So, we pick up the reading again at verse 19 of Ruth 2:

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 name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." ²⁰Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin."

SCOTT HOEZEE

²¹Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay close by my servants until they have finished all my harvest.'" ²²And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women. Otherwise, you might be bothered in another field." ²³So Ruth stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

By the way, Dave, that line just struck me: She lived with her mother-in-law. They are both living again now...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Having been on the precipice of death.

DAVE BAST

And Naomi, the bitter Mara, you know, suddenly: Blessed be the Lord; blessed be Boaz. This eruption of gratitude and joy because she realizes now that God hasn't abandoned her; he is not going to leave her in her sorrow; he is faithful. Here is another striking detail: He is faithful to the living and the dead. He has not forsaken either the living or the dead, Naomi says, because ultimately her dead sons are going to have offspring through this mechanism that we are going to see operating in the book of Ruth, where a relative will come and take the place.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, Naomi not only utters a sigh of relief that Ruth had a good day, the wheels start turning in her head, too: Oh, this might just work out quite well for us. Don't you even think about going to a different field. You stick close to this Boaz guy because he is a near kin and something...I think Naomi is beginning to turn the corner back toward a little bit of hope. She has been emptied out, right? We saw that in Chapter 1; she was emptied out. She went away full, she came home empty; but now, even as they literally could fill up on some grain for dinner, her hope is starting to fill up again, too. Maybe, just maybe, the Lord God of Israel—El Shaddai—the Almighty hasn't abandoned her after all.

DAVE BAST

Right; in the next program and the one after that we are going to talk quite a bit about this role of the kinsman redeemer. He is a kinsman of ours, Naomi exclaims about Boaz; and that is more than just a close relative. So, we will reserve that for the next program in some detail, but meanwhile, I think what is important to focus on here is how God is at work bringing blessing, even out of bitterness and sorrow, through the ordinary, faithful actions of regular people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So, Ruth commits to Naomi, that is key, that is the start of it all. Boaz is just keeping God's law. He is trying to live the way he knows he ought to live, and the Lord brings them together and the story goes on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is going to be a pretty important story because we know the only reason the story of Ruth is preserved for us in scripture is because her family line is going to lead straight to Jesus; and Ruth will be one of very few women mentioned in the family tree of Jesus, come Matthew 1 later in the Bible; but right, we often think of God's providence, you know: Where is God working in the Bible? Oh, well, he parted the waters of the Red Sea, or he sent the ten plagues, or you know, he flashes lightning from the sky and licks up the offering of Elijah on Mount Carmel. That is God—that is God's miraculous...but you know what? Ninety nine times out of a hundred God's providence operates this way: Quietly, out of the eyesight of most people, and through the very simple acts of obedience of regular human beings just doing what God told them to do, as Boaz does here in respecting the gleaner laws, but also in respecting the fact that over, not just the gleaner law, you know...we read that earlier from Leviticus 22, but it is not just the gleaner law. God's whole law...you will read this again and again and again in Leviticus...you have to extend extra care to the alien within your gates. The foreigner needs special protection in Israel, and Boaz is doing that, too. This is the opening God needed to bring life back to Naomi and Ruth.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you know, the original promise that God gave to Abraham was that he was blessed to be a blessing, and that the world would be blessed through him; and we see that playing out now in the lives of these small-town people. Remember, at this point, Bethlehem is not a famous place...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No.

DAVE BAST

Nobody has come from there yet...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not yet.

DAVE BAST

Of any significance; and Boaz is not a big shot, you know. Okay, he is a property owner, but he is not over rich. He is out there working with his hired hands, right alongside them, but he is faithful; and it is God, as you say, working through the faithfulness of regular people who love him and know him and honor him and just want to live their lives in such a way that God's love kind of flows through them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is still true in the Church today. There are no unimportant people; there are no unimportant believers. God is working through all of us, and often through some of the smallest things we do, God's

providence marches forward, even as it is doing here in the book of Ruth, through surprising people in surprising places, life is making a comeback.

DAVE BAST

Amen. Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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