

I NEED A HERO, PART II

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This is our second week of looking at the book of Ruth. Last week, as you may recall, we met the woman Naomi. She and her husband and sons had left Bethlehem during a famine and moved to the country of Moab, where they settled down for ten years and her sons got married. Then her husband and sons had died, leaving her and her two daughters-in-law to grieve on their own.

One daughter-in-law went back home, but the other one, Ruth, told Naomi she would stick with her to the end. She said “Whatever life brings, I’m in this adventure with you until the day one of us dies. Your God is my God. Your people are my people.”

We saw in that part of the story how God can work his own purposes in our lives despite our mistakes, despite the onset of tragedy and by using rather insignificant means.

Ruth and Naomi set off and returned to Bethlehem, and they arrived there right at harvest time. That’s where we pick up the story this morning.

Ruth 2:1-3:1

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

Just as a side note – This is a case of the narrator telling us something that the main characters do not yet know. He’s giving us a little clue that this is an important fact. But Naomi and Ruth haven’t made the connection yet themselves.

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

Another side note: There was no welfare system in ancient Israel, but God had established a law to act as a safety net for people like Ruth and Naomi.

Lev 19:9-10

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. 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.

This is something you can still find today, like this woman in Mexico. In Ruth and Naomi’s day, the men would go through the fields and chop down the wheat or barley. Women would come behind them and gather up the wheat into sheaves. Then the poor, the “gleaners”, would come along and grab whatever scraps had fallen out. Since people

were very careful to gather everything, there usually wasn't a whole lot left. One author I read said it would be a bit like trying to make a living collecting aluminum cans. It can be done, but it's a subsistence.

Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!"

"The LORD bless you!" they called back.

Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?"

The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."

So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?"

Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May 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."

"May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls."

At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar."

When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her."

So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. She 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.

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

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.

"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."

A final sidenote: What is this kinsman-redeemer concept? Again, it goes back to ancient laws in Israel.

Leviticus 25:25-26

If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold.

This same law applied if a man died without leaving an heir. A kinsman redeemer would take the widow as his own wife and raise children in the name of the deceased. Or, if someone got into a financial bind that put them into slavery, the kinsman redeemer would buy them back.

Back to our story:

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

Naomi 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."

So 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.

“And she lived with her mother-in-law”. If that doesn’t make you feel a little sympathy for this woman, I don’t know what will.

The plot is thickening in our story. A new man has entered the scene, food begins rolling in, life is starting to look a bit better for our main characters. If you were to summarize what this chapter is all about, you could sum it up with the word “grace.”

What is grace? The classic definition of the word is “unmerited favor.” Dr. Chuck Wall of Bakersfield College was the one to coin the phrase “random acts of kindness”, and that could be another way to think of grace. It is kindness shown without regard to what a person actually deserves. In God’s case, it’s not random because it comes from who he is, but the idea is the same. The U2 song called Grace personifies this concept as a woman and says, “When she walks down the street you can hear the strings.”

You can hear the strings in the story of Ruth. It’s like a symphony is beginning to play in the background as we see one act of kindness heaped on another.

As events unfold, we discover more and more layers to this thing called grace. Rather than just inform us about grace, the text prompts us to action. It encourages a response. I see four things that we’re encouraged to do by God’s grace in this chapter.

Squeeze out.

As I read this story, I believe that grace is there to be squeezed out of everything in life. It permeates our existence.

I heard a story about orange juice on NPR this week. Did you know that orange juice consumption in America has slipped 6% in the past two years, and that they’re blaming it on the Atkins diet? People want low carbs so they’re switching to bottled water.

My question for you is this: Do you know how much of an orange is water? It’s 81%. You’d never know that or think that by looking at an orange. But it’s completely saturated with water.

Look at this verse with me again:

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

As it turned out? She “found herself” working there? That sounds like very coincidental language. She just happened to end up where she did. It was random. There was no planning on her part, no knowledge of the man who owned the field. You wouldn’t expect the choices she made to be 81% filled with grace.

Yet God orchestrated the situation to bring Ruth to the right field. He knew she would go to that particular field on that particular day and bump into those particular people. How amazing is that? Our God coordinates the events of our days, even when we’re totally in the dark about what he’s doing.

Psalm 37:23

*The steps of the godly are directed by the LORD.
He delights in every detail of their lives.*

Most of the time, I blunder through my days unconscious of the fact that God is at work in who I bump into, conversations that happen. But if he's truly directing my steps, I need to be paying attention. Henry Blackaby wrote,

"One of the greatest tragedies among God's people is that while they have a deep longing to experience Him, they are experiencing God day after day but do not know how to recognize him."

Sometimes he can do that when we might think he's not paying attention. Most of you know that Marisa Hale was in a bad car wreck this week. A driver plowed over the median and into the driver's side of her car. We look at that as terrible and unfortunate. We call it an accident. But there were many things about it that seem more than fortunate. To use the language of Ruth, as it turned out, Greta wasn't in the car with her. As it turned out, Marisa happened to look over and see the car headed for her. As it turned out, she happened to have the presence of mind to lean over into the passenger side. As it turned out, the brunt of the force was taken by the bar between the front and rear doors. Looking at the damage, Marisa should have been severely injured, but she was able to walk away.

There is more going on than meets the eye. We can find great comfort in knowing that God's grace is packed into every situation. We just need to squeeze it out, to look for that grace and see what God might have planned for us.

When Ruth finally meets Boaz after working in his field, he has some advice for her.

So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled."

This is a key truth about grace that is often overlooked, and I think this story summarizes it for us by telling us to

Stick around.

Ruth has looked and found a place where she has been taken in, shown great kindness and seen her life take a turn for the better. Boaz tells her that to really take full advantage of this good fortune, there are some rules. There's still work to be done – she needs to glean in a certain way. And she needs to stick around, not go exploring other fields for an even better opportunity. She will enjoy the protection of Boaz as long as she is in his field, but if she chooses to leave, she opens herself up to experiencing hardship.

When we talk about God's grace, we usually focus on the fact that he gives it to us freely, even though we haven't done anything to deserve it. And that's absolutely what he does, just like Boaz. But also just like Boaz, there are some ground rules for fully enjoying that grace. And the rules are there for our benefit – to protect us and keep us from danger.

God's forgiveness is a free gift, and sometimes that makes it easy to think sin is no big deal. If it's free to us and we can ask for a little more every time we need it, that's a pretty great set up. In that case, we wouldn't have to change how we live.

But that just shows that we don't fully grasp how much that free gift cost God. When we really come to grips with how God went about giving us that gift through Jesus, we find that it demands a response on our part. We can't go looking for a better crop in another field. Which is what we have a tendency to do.

One of my roommates in college dated the same girl for a really long time, but was having a hard time getting around to ask her to marry him, and when it came right down to it, he said it was because he wanted to see who else might be out there for him. So he broke up with her, only to discover that she was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Fortunately he realized what a dumb mistake he was making and he went back and married her.

We can get this idea in our heads that there is something else out there for us. The old hymn says, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. I'm prone to leave the God I love." It's like an adolescent impulse to rebel and throw off all the restraints of living at home. But no one else is going to offer us this level of grace and kindness. The "stick around" rule is there for our benefit. And while God will always take us back, there is so much we give up each time we leave the center of his will.

Boaz does more than give Ruth instruction. He also offers a prayer for her.

May 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.

What Boaz may not realize is that not only is he praying the prayer – he's answering it at the same time. Ruth and Naomi both recognized that when she got home that night.

How I interpret that is that when it comes to God's grace, this story is telling us to

Stand in.

We act as God's agents. We stand in for him in a sense, being the means through which he shows his grace to people.

That's not how we tend to think of God's grace. We think of it as some disembodied miracle, or a Christian form of good karma. God's grace is out there in a vague spiritual sense.

I just read a story about a man who was getting drunk at a bar in Alaska. He was telling the bartender that he no longer believed in God after his twin engine plane crashed in the tundra.

“Yeah – I lay there in the wreckage for hours, almost frozen to death, crying out for God to save me. I prayed and prayed but he didn’t raise one finger to help. So I’m through with that whole charade. It’s a joke.”

The bartender looked at him and said, “Well, you’re here aren’t you? You were saved.”

“Yeah that’s right,” said the man, “But only because some Eskimo came along and found me...”

We have this mystical idea about God’s grace, but it’s usually much more practical than we might think. For Ruth, grace came dressed up as Boaz. It was very concrete – food, water and a place to work.

We are called not only to pray for other people, that they’ll experience God’s grace. We’re called to be the means by which they experience that grace.

In order for Boaz to show kindness to Ruth, he had to give up something that was rightfully his. It was his land, his barley. He was losing part of his profit and livelihood by instructing his workers to leave some on the ground for Ruth.

When we think of showing grace to other people, it is going to cost us as well. It could be in the form of time and energy. I’ll give you a very tiny example. We had a new employee start in my department. I was showing him the ropes a bit throughout the morning. As it was getting closer to lunch, I had planned to go to the library to get some Sunday morning prep time in. I have to squeeze in every spare moment I can. I had this nagging feeling that I should take the new guy to lunch on his first day, but I buried it with the spiritual sounding argument that I really needed to get some studying done. I even made it so far as to walk out the door before I felt so convicted I had to go back inside and invite him to lunch.

As it turned out, he’s a Christian and we were able to mutually encourage each other in our faith in addition to me being able to welcome him on his first day.

I share that not as a story to say “Follow my example.” I bring it up because even that very small thing to do required me to make a sacrifice, or at least think I was making one. And sacrifices aren’t always giving up something that’s unnecessary or bad. That’s why it’s a sacrifice. And it gets harder the larger the act of grace we’re trying to show. Maybe we have to give up an entire afternoon to clean a house for somebody who’s sick, or fix somebody’s car when we’d rather spend time with our family. Maybe it means postponing a purchase of our own and writing out a check for somebody who is having trouble making ends meet.

Or it could be less tangible. We may have to decide that it isn’t the most important thing in the world to be the one who was right in an argument, that a relationship with the other person is worth holding out an olive branch. Maybe we have to give up our right to be the last one to apologize.

How can we be the ones who stand in like Boaz, both in prayer AND action for other people? That's when grace really starts to come alive.

At the end of the day, Ruth went back to her home with Naomi.

So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. She 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.

One final principal that flows out of the last one is that when we experience grace, we should let it

Spill over.

Ruth went home with about 22 quarts of grain. That was way more than she was going to be able to eat. She had plenty to share with Naomi.

That's how God's grace is. He has untapped resources. Do you remember the story of the widow with all the oil jars? God kept multiplying the oil until it filled every jar she had. Or the story about Jesus feeding the 5,000. There was enough fish and bread for everyone, plus some left over.

But sometimes we can become stingy and not free with sharing the same grace we've been given.

I came across a book by Rabbi Abraham Twerski. In it he said, *"Did you ever watch a horse drink from a stream? You will notice that he taps with his hoof while drinking. The horse sees his reflection in the water and thinks there is another horse there who will drink all the water and that there will be none left for him. He therefore taps with his hoof in an attempt to scare the other horse away."*

God's stream is full. There's no shortage of water. We can be extravagantly generous with the grace we show to other people.

That's my dream for New Day. I don't want to be known as the church with great music or that church where you can wear jeans or where they have great snacks every week. Instead, wouldn't it be great if when people come here, they say, "Wow. You know, people there really treat each other with respect and care. They looked out for me and made sure my needs were met. Something different is happening there."

Our ability to share what God has given to us is key to people believing that we've really encountered God for ourselves.

And maybe that's the starting question: Have we experienced God's grace? Are we squeezing grace out of our circumstances? Do we see where God is at work in our lives?

And are we sticking around, or still deciding? Have we made the decision that we're not going to leave God's side, that we're going to work in his fields rather than wandering off to do something else for a while? He offers us his protection and abundance. Will we take full advantage of the deal?

Third, what sacrifices am I making to stand in for him? Are we taking our role as messengers of grace seriously? What sacrifices will I need to make for that one person who keeps coming to mind?

Finally, am I willing to spill? Am I generously letting what I've received spill over to others? There's plenty in what God has given us to feed other people. We don't need to worry that what we have been given isn't enough to help somebody else. Maybe it's just even sharing a word or two with somebody how God has blessed you. That testimony itself can be enough to give somebody else courage.

At the end of the day, when we take home what God has given us, we thresh it around and sift out what it all means, we will find that there's this huge overflow – more than we can ever possibly use up. His generosity through Jesus more than meets our need.

Boaz shared his abundance with Ruth and Ruth shared with Naomi. The grace that we show to other people is something that they will then be able to turn around and show to others. “When she walks down the street, you can hear the strings.” I'm excited to hear that song coming out of this group of people, the sweet music of Jesus' love that a whole world is waiting to hear.