



**T**he stories of the great heroes and heroines of the Bible inspire and instruct us in our own lives. Each one has a “who knows?” moment when God’s story seems to break into regular, everyday life—a critical moment offering a sense of calling or purpose. It’s as true for us as it was in ancient days. Who knows? Maybe God has plans to use you for His glory. Who knows? Maybe God put you where you are, with the influence you have, for a reason. Who knows? Maybe the things you suffer today will make sense in time. When God shows up, a sense of mysterious discovery enters our lives. Who knows what God has planned?

## WHO KNOWS? • RUTH 2:17 - 23 • Tom Pipkin • May 13, 2018

Today we are continuing with our *Who Knows* series, where we have been exploring how we can see our own stories in the context of God's story. Today, in particular I want to ask you this...Who knows what God might do to rescue you when things in your life are not going the way you had hoped? Who knows when God's breakthrough will come? And who knows how your story with God might turn out?

I think it is fitting that on Mother's Day we are looking at a story from Scripture that has to do with a mother and a daughter and seeing in God's story how God indeed broke through and rescued them both. For those of you who aren't familiar with how Ruth fits into God's big story of the Bible, Ruth was the great grandmother of the famous king, David. That's right. She was Obed's mama and Obed was Jesse's daddy and Jesse, of course, had his seven sons, the youngest of whom was David. Oh and if you want to see the even bigger picture, look at the genealogy found in Matthew 1. And you can count the 28 generations that go down from David all the way to Jesus.

In a nutshell, the book of Ruth tells the story of an Israelite couple, and their two sons, living in the time of the Judges, who had to move to the country of Moab because there was a famine in their home town of Bethlehem and throughout the land of Judah. They were named Elimelech and Naomi. While living in Moab, Elimelech died, and Naomi was now a widow with two sons. Her sons married Moabite women—one named Orpah and the other named Ruth. After living there about ten years, both of Naomi's sons died leaving Naomi a widow with two widowed daughters in law. By this time, the famine back home had ended and Naomi decided to go back to Judah. On the way there, Naomi began to worry about what life would be like for these two women and so she told them to go back to their own people—freeing them from any obligation that they might have had to care for her and freeing them up marry Moabite men. She kissed them and told them to go. At first, they both protested, but then Orpah decided to take Naomi up on her offer and left. But Ruth had a different response. She was determined to care for Naomi and replied with the now famous words found in Ruth 1:16-17: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever

so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." That's quite an oath... quite a commitment!

The two women make it back to Bethlehem. The whole town is stirred up because they recognize Naomi, and she and Ruth are in bad shape. Naomi tells her old neighbors, "Don't call me Naomi (which means "pleasant"). Call me Mara (which means "bitter"), because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:20-21). Says a lot about how she felt about Ruth... doesn't it?

This morning as we consider the idea that God, among other things, is in the rescuing business... that God is ready and willing to break into our stories in unexpected ways. I would like to suggest three things from this story that can have an impact on your story.

First, God is providential. Take a look at the story of Ruth. In Ruth 2:3b, we read: "As it turned out... Ruth found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech." And who was Elimelech? Oh yeah, that was the name of Naomi's husband who had died back in Moab. So Ruth begins to glean in the fields and the text says she, "just happened" to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, Naomi's relative. This statement is used by the writer not to say "she was lucky," but in fact as literary tool (hyperbole) that does away with any rational explanation of what is going on here. You see, this is about God's Providence—how God carefully guides and directs things to bring about His purposes. Consider some of the "just happens" so far... Ruth and Naomi just happen to come at the time of barley harvest: The beginning of the barley harvest is marked by the celebration of Passover. They would have been coming to town at a time when the city was memorializing God's past sovereignty and His current provision. This is a lesson for them. (Oh and did anyone else notice that barley is the same grain that is mentioned in the account of how Jesus fed the 5,000. While the other gospels don't give the details, John's gospel makes the point that the loaves Jesus used came from a boy who happened to be there. The disciple Andrew said it: "Here is a boy with five small *barley* loaves and two small fish..." And of course, when we think of that great miracle it is all about God's provision and providence... isn't it?)

What else just happened for Ruth and Naomi? Well, let's see... Ruth just happens to come to Boaz' field, who just happens to be a bachelor and a godly man, Ruth just happens to find favor in the harvesters' eyes to allow her to work, and Ruth just happens to be

working at a time when Boaz shows up. Oh, and in case you might have missed it... all of this just happens to be taking place in Bethlehem: Hmm... what significant event would, centuries later take place in Bethlehem? It's a reminder for us about how God was working together the events of the present, even then, centuries earlier, to bring about the ultimate culmination of His providential plan in Jesus.

You probably have a story from your own life about how it just happened that something took place at just the right time or in just the right place. And "as it turned out" this thing that just happened to occur ended up leading you into a whole new direction in your life. Sometimes, this comes at a time when you are leaning very much into that direction. Sometimes it happens at a time when you are strongly resisting a particular decision or direction. And sometimes, it just happens during a time of difficulty and loss... as was the case for Naomi and Ruth. At all times, God is providential.

Secondly, we see in this story that God responds to faithful acts. Ruth is faithful—she is fully committed to caring for Naomi and is even committed to Naomi's God. This faithfulness leads us to our passage this morning. After Boaz meets Ruth and begins to take a liking to her, he gives her special permission to gather grain even from among the sheaves and even told his workers to leave whole stalks for her to gather from. So, you see, what began with a faithful act from Ruth of just gleaning in the field, leads to the pouring out of God's grace, through Boaz.

Boaz's redemptive grace is a response to Ruth's faith. He praises her radical abandonment of the only life and the only home she had ever known and her radical commitment to God and His people, namely Naomi. In faith, what Ruth had done did not make sense—she walked with conviction, what would have been seen by anyone as a foolish path. She pressed into her helplessness, trusting only that God would be gracious. And what does this faithfully foolish action bring about? Look at what Boaz says in 2:12: "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." Boaz describes what Ruth did as having taken refuge under the wings of God. And even though Boaz rightly identifies God as the source of blessing, Boaz does that as he provides God's blessing. So, not only is Ruth faithful here, but Boaz is faithful as well.

I think it's important for us to remember that God's grace doesn't usually fall out of the sky into our laps when we are in need. No, it usually comes

through the faithful actions of men and women who know God's grace. God's providential plan works through our actions. So what does that mean? It means that our actions have meaning, that God is made known through doing. Just as the grace of God comes through Boaz, we are to be a grace to others—even to people that our culture deems as unworthy—even when it's inconvenient, difficult and even costly. There is no program for that.

I think it's important for us to see here all of the things that Boaz shares with Ruth: his wealth, his food, his fellowship, his protection and even his reputation. Ruth was a foreigner after all. But Boaz doesn't share with Ruth about his direct relationship to her. Even though he knows he is a kinsman redeemer, Boaz doesn't claim to be Ruth's savior. The only source of salvation Boaz confesses is God. He doesn't rob God of His glory. He faithfully blesses in response to Ruth's faith. God responds to faithful acts.

And then thirdly, we see in this story that God is our only hope for redemption. Think about it. There is no real hope in God's plan if His ultimate goal is only to relieve our earthly pain and suffering. It might make me feel good temporarily. But there is no goodness or security in writing me a check to help in my situation if He doesn't transform my situation all together. If I'm in a desperate situation—without hope of getting out of that situation on my own; if I'm drowning and about to go under for good, I don't need someone to encourage me to swim or throw me water wings. No, I need someone to rescue me!

Naomi knew that they needed more than relief. And when Naomi hears the name of the man who owns the field, she has hope for redemption. Boaz is a kinsman redeemer, meaning he is one of the men charged with the responsibility to rescue them both. That was the law and the custom of the people of Judah. So, let me ask you an easy question: "Where else do we use the word, 'Redeemer?'" Jesus, right? We talk about Jesus as our redeemer. So here we find in Boaz, a picture of Jesus Christ. Boaz was a great man with great wealth and great power, who entered into the suffering of Naomi and Ruth, but he did more than just bring them relief. He rescued them! Likewise, Jesus entered into our suffering to do more than relieve, He came to rescue us. And like Boaz in the Ruth story, Jesus does more than just give us His food or money. No, He rescues us... and ultimately, like Boaz did with Ruth, Jesus enters into a marriage relationship with us. One of the strongest images of the church is that we are the bride of Christ! Jesus looks at what is unlovable,

unworthy, and unwanted and He rescues us. He forgives our sins, he cleans us up, he removes our fears and our shame and He frees us to live with Him and with a new identity.

Do you know what the literal definition of the word “Redeem” is? It means to buy back. One way to think about this is that when you “redeem” a coupon, it isn’t you who redeems it, the store redeems it—it buys it back. Boaz bought a field so that he could get what came with it—namely Ruth; but the price that Jesus paid for us was far higher than the price of a field. More than what Boaz did, we find that Jesus could only redeem us through pain and suffering and death—through the cross. And when He paid the price for our redemption in full on the cross, He paid it in full. He gives us new life, new strength, new joy, a new story. Ephesians 1:7 says “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace!” When you thank Jesus for paying the price to buy you back from sin and death, your story is overtaken by God’s story. You are no longer on your own. You are in Christ. You are no longer a foreigner. You are His child, fully restored and fully redeemed.

That was Ruth’s story. She lived with a growing understanding and trust in God’s providence. In caring for Naomi, she stepped forward in faith. And she was redeemed... by Boaz and, through him, by God. That can be your story too. This morning, you might be facing all kinds of difficulty. You may not know which way to turn or what steps to take. You may feel like Naomi, empty and bitter. But the good news is that God has already included you in His story. And it’s a big story. It’s a story of freedom, restoration, fulfillment, redemption. Trust in God’s providence today... that He really has you in His grasp and at the center of His attention. Trust that in Jesus Christ, He has already taken action to rescue you. Be assured that as you step out in faith, your faithfulness will not go unnoticed, but will be acted upon. Believe that Jesus is indeed your redeemer. He’s your only hope for redemption and He has already bought you back with a price. You belong to Him. He will continue to be at work in you according to the riches of His grace. Make Ruth’s story your story; make God’s story your story today. Amen.

## STUDY GUIDE

### WHO KNOWS? • RUTH 2:17-23

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in God’s Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Ruth 2:17-23. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you read. Underline or note words or phrases that seem meaningful. Read it one more time. Pray for your study of God’s Word.

- Ruth and Naomi are desperate. Their only plan for physical survival is to find food. One writer describes Ruth as “a gutsy risk-taker and a powerful agent for change among God’s people.”\* Review pieces of Ruth’s story: Ruth 1:15-18, Ruth 2:1-3. What risks did Ruth take in her faithfulness to Naomi? What were her options?
- If you were Ruth, how would you have responded in this situation?
- What do you think was Naomi’s tone in verse 19? What shift do you see in Naomi? (Remember, earlier in Ruth chapter 1 Naomi asked to be called “bitter.”)
- God’s grace is seen throughout the story of Ruth and Naomi even when they are unaware. Read Ruth 2:3: “As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz...” God was obviously working “behind the scenes”! Breakthrough was coming! How can understanding God’s work like this encourage us to not give up on God?

\*Carolyn Custis James in *The Gospel of Ruth: Loving God Enough to Break the Rules*

Going Deeper: Where in your story right now do you need to be reminded that God is at work “behind the scenes?”

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God’s Mission

“One day, God showed up.”

How have you seen God showing up in your life this week?

#### **IN:** Connect With the Family of God

Pray for our church. Pray we would trust that God is at work!