



# Acceptance in Community

March 28, 2010

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ruth 2, 3**

**PRINTED TEXT: Ruth 2:5–12; 3:9–11**

*“And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character.”*

*—Ruth 3:11*

## Opening Song

---

### Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

---

### Opening Prayer

**Ruth 2:5–12; 3:9–11 (NIV)**

**2**<sup>5</sup> Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?" <sup>6</sup> The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi." <sup>7</sup> 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." <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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." <sup>10</sup> 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?" <sup>11</sup> 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." <sup>12</sup> 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."

**3**<sup>9</sup> "Who are you?" he asked. "I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer." <sup>10</sup> "The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor." <sup>11</sup> And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character.

**INTRODUCTION****A. TAKE THE FIFTH!**

The caption above is usually associated with criminal trials and investigations in which a defendant pleads the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States: “No person ... shall be compelled to be a witness against himself.” In certain legal settings, the use of the phrase “I plead the Fifth” makes us suspicious that the one being questioned has something to hide. The phrase was used often in the legal proceedings ensuing from the Enron scandal of a few years ago.

Most believers know that the first-named fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 is *love*. The fifth fruit in the list is *kindness*, which carries the connotation of being gentle. Each community and home would be a better place if more people would “take the fifth” fruit and resolve to conduct themselves with gentleness and kindness in their interactions.

Illustrations about the effects of such an attitude abound. They include accounts showing that people of esteem have demonstrated that they really do care. For example, presidents have visited military hospitals and have used their position to help others. I heard a story of a person who was ready to attack and probably kill someone who had just insulted him. Another person heard the verbal abuse, and he responded by kindly offering to help the insulted person in some way. This action brought a sudden stop to the anger that was building, and there was no physical attack.

I also heard a story of an Arab in Israel who saw an Israeli with car trouble, so he stopped to help. The Arab took the other man to an auto parts store where items for repair could be obtained. Later someone commented that he did not know that Arabs would help Jews. The Arab replied, “Oh, I’m a Christian, and I am compelled to help those in need.” Christianity is about redemption in Christ, and it is also about the fruit of the Spirit.

**B. LESSON BACKGROUND**

Last week’s lesson was from the first chapter of the book of Ruth. It focused on the family of Elimelech as it experienced famine, a move to a foreign land, marriages, and deaths. The emphasis shifted to the three women who survived, and the famous statement of devotion by Ruth was the concluding verse: that Ruth would be loyal to Naomi and to her God.

The two women successfully made the journey to Bethlehem. As today’s lesson opens, they have arrived in early spring, just as the barley harvest was ready to begin (Ruth 1:22). This fact allowed Ruth to obtain food.

**I. BOAZ NOTICES RUTH (RUTH 2:5–12)**

The Lord’s economic plan for the poor in ancient Israel is not welfare, but what has been termed “workfare.” The Law of Moses states that the corners of the fields are not to be harvested, and any stalks of grain that are dropped are not to be retrieved; in this way the poor and the sojourner will have food to eat (Leviticus 19:9, 10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19–21).

Fitting this category, Ruth takes the initiative in asking Naomi if she can go to the fields to glean (Ruth 2:2). Ruth ends up in the fields of “Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech” (2:3). Most students interpret this to be an act of God’s providence in leading her to the right place to bring about a phase of God’s redemptive plan.

**A. DISCOVERING RUTH (v. 5)**

**5. *Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, “Whose young woman is that?”***

A second “happening” is that *Boaz* comes to the barley fields at the time that *Ruth* is present. This may be his regular custom if he is involved in all aspects of the harvesting process. He evidently wants to be acquainted personally with the workers in his fields. He immediately notices someone unfamiliar to him. *Boaz* is listed in three genealogical lists in the Bible: at the end of the book of *Ruth*, in 1 Chronicles 2:12, and in Matthew 1:5 as a part of Christ’s genealogy.

***B. DESCRIBING RUTH (vv. 6, 7)***

**6. *The foreman replied, “She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi.***

The *foreman* of the harvesters has several responsibilities: to employ the workers, to pay them at the end of the day, and to ensure the availability of the basic supplies they need during the day. Some have suggested that these supervisors monitor the carefulness of the workers to make sure they are not leaving an excess amount behind—just in case a worker’s family members are among the poor who are gleaning for themselves.

It is sometimes thought that a generous landowner will instruct his harvesters to be deliberately careless so that the poor may have enough to eat. Whatever the situation, the work supervisor determines *Ruth*’s identity and why she is in the barley field.

**7. *“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.”***

The *foreman* reports *Ruth*’s request to *Boaz*. This enables *Boaz* to know why she is present. The arrival of *Naomi* and *Ruth* from *Moab* is common knowledge in *Bethlehem*. *Boaz* is now able to have personal contact with the young woman who has come with *Naomi*. There is a natural curiosity to know

what type of person *Ruth* really is, so this prompts the *foreman* to observe her at work. Work habits are a good gauge of character for a society in which everyone is expected take part in making a living for the family.

The supervisor is able to give a good report about *Ruth* in this regard. The work involves a repetitious leaning over to pick up stalks of grain that the workers ahead of her fail to gather or accidentally drop. The work supervisor is aware that *Ruth* has taken one break from her work to rest in the small hut or tent that is provided. Such a mid-morning break is understandable.

***C. PROVISIONS FOR RUTH (vv. 8, 9)***

**8. *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.***

The question and imperative by *Boaz* show his compassion. This time he has a special interest and concern for *Ruth* and *Naomi*, who are related to him through their marriages. The expression *my daughter* is usually thought to show that he is considerably older. Some Jewish traditions suggest that he is about age 80, but that idea cannot be verified by Scripture.

In the harvest procedure of the day, it is the men who go through the fields with their sickles. The technique probably is to hold the stalks with one hand while cutting with the other hand. The worker then drops that handful on the ground and advances for the next swath.

The *servant girls* may be the women who follow to collect the small clusters of stalks. One suggestion regarding ancient harvest methods is that the women take their accumulations to a central location to make stacks. The stacks are then transported to a threshing floor. There the stalks, husks, and chaff are separated from the grain. It is understandable that handling the stalks so many times results in some falling to the ground. They are not to be picked up or

retrieved, for this is God's provision for the poor.

**9. "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."**

Boaz continues his special considerations to Ruth. If she needs a *drink* of water, she is given permission to help herself to what has been brought to the harvest field for his workers. The *water jars* are probably the usual water skins. Boaz's statement also indicates that he has *told* his *men* not to bother Ruth in any way. He advises her to work only in the fields where his workers are. Ruth 2:14 adds that Boaz invites Ruth to eat bread with him and the others. Bread is the normal staple of that society. It will not spoil or mold quickly, so it can be safely taken to the fields. It is often dipped in a vinegar wine, perhaps mixed with some olive oil. This softens the bread and gives it an extra flavor.

#### **D. PERPLEXITY OF RUTH (v. 10)**

**10. 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?"**

Ruth's responses to these kindnesses include bowing so that *her face* is *to the ground*. In this manner, she begins to express her gratitude to Boaz. Ruth does not understand why she, *a foreigner* who has come to Bethlehem only recently, should even be noticed.

Ruth's comments are normal for anyone who is in a new environment or situation, for she is concerned about acceptance or about what others are thinking. She probably has been introduced to the women who are old friends of Naomi. But to be in the grain fields with these men and women can cause some unease.

#### **E. PERSPECTIVES ABOUT RUTH (vv. 11, 12)**

**11. 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."**

The statement by *Boaz* is a positive commentary on both Ruth and her *mother-in-law*, Naomi. A smaller, tight-knit community often takes a long time to evaluate a newcomer. Sometimes it may take almost a generation before acceptance finally occurs.

Naomi has risen above her personal losses. One result is her positive endorsement of daughter-in-law Ruth, who recently accompanied her from Moab. It is very likely that Naomi has told of Ruth's commitments (see Ruth 1:16–18). Ruth's willingness to leave Moab, her family, and her gods commends her highly in the eyes of the residents of Bethlehem.

**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 continues his affirmation of Ruth by giving what is considered a prayer of blessing or a strong wish. He is confident that the Lord will reward Ruth for the personal sacrifices that she has made because of her love for her mother-in-law and for God. Boaz is pleased about Ruth's commitment to serve the God of Israel.

Boaz uses a very striking word picture in this regard—that of a young bird taking refuge *under* the *wings* of its mother. As a mother hen provides protection for her young, so Boaz desires God to bless and protect Ruth. This vivid figure of speech is a frequent way to show God's care. It is found in both the Old Testament (Psalm 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7) and the New Testament (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34).

**II. BOAZ RESPECTS RUTH (RUTH 3:9–11)**

When Ruth goes to the harvest that first morning, she likely has feelings of uncertainty about what will happen with the people in a place where she has never been. As she returns to Naomi that evening, she carries about two-thirds of a bushel of grain (Ruth 2:17). That is the equivalent of several days' wages, and it is an amazing amount for gleaning in just one day. Ruth has much to say to Naomi about the kindnesses shown to her by Boaz.

In the intervening verses not in today's text, Naomi assumes the role of matchmaker. She knows that Boaz is more than just a relative of her deceased husband. According to the Mosaic law, Boaz can be a "redeemer." Such relatives assume the responsibilities of redeeming a family's land that has been sold, purchasing the freedom of a relative who has sold himself into servitude, being the avenger for a near relative who is murdered, and/or marrying a childless widow (Deuteronomy 25:5–10). The marriage under the latter concept is known as a *levirate marriage*; that is from the Latin word *levir*, meaning "husband's brother." The barley and wheat harvests are almost complete, and the marriage proposal is about to take place.

**A. REMINDERS BY RUTH (v. 9)**

**9. "Who are you?" he asked.**

***"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer."***

*Ruth* carefully follows the instructions of Naomi (Ruth 3:1–4, not in today's text). In that regard, Ruth goes to the threshing floor at night without being detected. She observes where Boaz lies down for the night, and at the proper time she lies down near him. During the night Boaz stirs, detects that someone has invaded his area of privacy, and quietly asks a question to determine the person's identity.

Ruth's answer reflects a boldness that she has already demonstrated in earlier choices to follow Naomi and the God of Israel. Her response has three parts to it: to provide her name, to state that she is subservient to Boaz, and to suggest that Boaz *spread* his covering over her to acknowledge the special obligations that exist because of his being a relative of Naomi's deceased husband.

Ruth's statement is fascinating because she uses one of the same Hebrew words that Boaz has used in pronouncing a blessing on her. Ruth 2:12 translates this word as "wings." The plural form is the most frequent use of this word, and that is understandable. The word may also be given as the fold or the hem of a *garment*, and that is the meaning here. In one sense Ruth is challenging Boaz to recognize that he should be the one who is used of God to provide the covering that he has mentioned previously in his oral blessing.

**B. RESPONSES BY BOAZ (vv. 10, 11)**

**10. "The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor."**

Boaz has the ability to comprehend the big picture immediately and to think about it clearly. His first words are another spiritual blessing that he pronounces on Ruth. This takes away any improper motives that are sometimes assigned to this event.

The phrase *my daughter* shows that Boaz is fully aware of the generational difference between himself and Ruth. He knows that Ruth's actions are a proposal for marriage. But he understands that her real motivation is to provide care for Naomi, and that this is the best way to do it. He sees that her goal is not just marriage, or she would have chosen a man who is younger.

**11. "And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my**

*fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character.”*

The intention of Boaz may be to provide an assurance that Ruth needs to hear. A different reaction by Boaz can produce great embarrassment. He therefore speaks to relieve any fears that she has. While she is bold to do the right thing, she may have doubts about the way her proposal will be received.

Boaz continues by saying that he *will do* for her *all* she requests. He is confident that others will be receptive to this arrangement. The Hebrew word that Boaz uses to describe Ruth (translated as *noble character*) is exactly the same word that is used to

describe Boaz in Ruth 2:1, there given as *wealth*.

Boaz keeps his word. He and Ruth marry, and they have a son who is named Obed (Ruth 4:17). But the story does not end there. Many believe that the reason for this book's being in the Bible is not to have a story of love and marriage, but to present more of the background of David, Israel's greatest king: Obed ends up being David's grandfather. Ruth's acceptance into a community and into a family results in blessings that lead to events that give access for anyone to have acceptance to God through Jesus, the Son of God.

### **CONCLUSION**

The opening words of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* are "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." These two phrases are among the most famous in English literature. The sharp contrast between the phrases is also a commentary on the closing chapters of the book of Judges and the four chapters of the book of Ruth.

The last three chapters of the book of Judges depict such things as the low estate of women, rape, death, war, and deception. Anyone who reads these chapters is reading about "the worst of times." Then to begin reading the book of Ruth is to find an oasis of family, devotion, and faith. It is "the best of times" when common people display love, loyalty, and blessed living.

The people in the town of Bethlehem in Ruth's day did not realize the importance of their village in God's plan. The book of Ruth shows that ordinary people are very important in the eyes of God. While they live out their lives they may never know about the far-reaching consequences of their decisions for God. That is why it is important for each believer to let his or her light shine (Matthew 5:14–16). To reflect the love of God in kind acts may have results far beyond what is ever imagined.

### **CARING FOR OTHERS**

Fred "Hargy" Hargesheimer's plane was shot down over the Pacific Ocean on June 5, 1943. He parachuted into enemy territory in Papua New Guinea. Finding shelter in an abandoned native hut, he lived for weeks on snails he found in a riverbed. Daily he recited Psalm 23 and reflected on the hope his faith gave him.

Natives in the area found Hargesheimer after a month. They showed him a note written by an Australian soldier that said to trust them because they had saved other pilots. They were Christians, and at great risk they protected the American from capture by the enemy.

Eventually, Hargesheimer made his way off the island by submarine. Years later, while corresponding with a missionary, he discovered his native rescuers needed a school. He raised

\$15,000 for a school building and brought in volunteer teachers. A few years later he built a library and clinic. Then, 27 years after his rescue, he and his wife moved to the island “to say thank you in a meaningful way.”

Fred Hargesheimer knew he had lived a blessed life, so he decided to return the blessing to those in greater need than he. Boaz lived a blessed life as a wealthy farmer. He decided to share his blessing with a poor, struggling widow and her mother-in-law. Details of such stories may vary, but the spirit is always the same: godly, blessed people genuinely care for others.

### ***A PLAN FOR SURVIVAL***

*Biosphere* was the brainchild of Texas oil millionaire Ed Bass. It was built in the desert near Tucson, Arizona, at a cost of about \$150 million. The project was designed to mimic the earth’s ability to provide all the needs of its inhabitants and thus anticipate how humans might live in colonies in space. Thus Biosphere was designed to be self-contained in terms of water, food, and air.

Eight people lived in Biosphere 2 from 1991 to 1993. But the experiment was called off due to crop failure and a deteriorating oxygen supply. Jane Poynter, one of the colonists, later said, “Basically, we suffocated, starved, and went mad.”

Compared with Biosphere 2, Naomi’s plan for survival was much simpler. It consisted of personal relationships based on hard work, integrity, and a benevolent spirit. Our lesson suggests that Ruth’s behavior was a well-orchestrated proposal for marriage. Naomi had devised the plan, Ruth carried it out, Boaz responded with appropriate integrity, and all three were blessed. In any area of life, well-conceived plans can bring blessings to everyone involved when those plans are implemented with skill, care, and godly motivation.

### **LET’S TALK IT OVER**

**1. How does God’s Old Testament plan for feeding the poor compare and contrast with modern efforts to care for the needy, in terms of governmental, church, and personal programs?**

**2. In what circumstances today is it helpful and harmful to identify and characterize people by ethnic background and/or country of origin? Why?**

**3. Do your work habits commend you to your supervisors? How can you improve in this area?**

**4. How does Boaz’s favor mirror the grace of God? How does all this speak to how we should treat others?**

**5. How can we demonstrate to others the virtue, kindness, and noble character that Boaz observes were true of Ruth?**

### **LET'S TALK IT OVER**

**1. How does God's Old Testament plan for feeding the poor compare and contrast with modern efforts to care for the needy, in terms of governmental, church, and personal programs?**

Some have categorized benevolence as being of two types: "giveaways" and "earn-your-ways." It is obvious that people who are physically and/or mentally incapable of caring for themselves must be helped without expectation that they can earn what is given to them (compare Acts 6:1). Problems arise when people are given things that they should earn. This can foster long-term dependency and feelings of inferiority.

God's plan required the poor to do some work, assuming they were able (Deuteronomy 24:19–21); the other side of this coin was the requirement that others had to make the work available for the poor to do (Leviticus 19:9, 10; 23:22). Work habits for harvesting taught the poor to exert themselves and learn skills necessary for an agrarian lifestyle, an early form of job training.

Churches can challenge the needy in similar ways. Dependent lifestyles deteriorate into the very opposite of God's desires for His people; see Proverbs 10:4; 12:27; 26:15; Ecclesiastes 10:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:11, 12. Personal responsibility to care for family members is found in 1 Timothy 5:3–16.

**2. In what circumstances today is it helpful and harmful to identify and characterize people by ethnic background and/or country of origin? Why?**

It seems natural to categorize and characterize people in various ways. God himself does so. One obvious way is "male and female" (Genesis 1:27). In Old Testament times, God also made a distinction between His people and "an alien" (Deuteronomy 14:21, among many). For our part, we must be careful here, since there's truth to the old saying "When we label, we disable."

Was the servant in today's passage speaking derogatorily of Ruth as being a pagan? Was he offering appropriate words of caution to Boaz? Sometimes we use ethnic labels with a sneer in our voices, reflecting an attitude of bias. Such labels may indicate that we have become an ungodly "respector of persons" (Acts 10:34).

**3. Do your work habits commend you to your supervisors? How can you improve in this area?**

Ruth impressed Boaz with her work habits. We would hope that we reap the same notice, protection, and blessing Ruth did. Diligence on the job typically receives notice and commendation. But even if it does not, we persist in a good work ethic because it is the godly thing to do.

As Paul says, “Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men” (Colossians 3:23)—and he was speaking to slaves! Our diligence awaits its reward from God. If people notice, then so much the better to draw attention to the one for whom we truly work.

**4. How does Boaz’s favor mirror the grace of God? How does all this speak to how we should treat others?**

Boaz goes beyond a minimalist approach to fulfilling the law regarding the poor. He demonstrated a true interest in and concern for those who gleaned in his fields. As a result, both Naomi and Ruth felt overwhelmed (Ruth 2:20, 21). If we provide only what people “deserve,” then we are not demonstrating the character of God.

“Why me?” is a natural response to grace. The answer, of course, is because the one who grants it wills it. If we begin to think we “deserve” the grace of another, our whole concept of grace is distorted. Grace is intrinsically undeserved. When we realize how gracious God has been to us, the issue then becomes “Will I be gracious to others as God has been to me?”

**5. How can we demonstrate to others the virtue, kindness, and noble character that Boaz observes were true of Ruth?**

There is a certain tightrope to be walked here. As Ruth’s kindness to Naomi was evident, people should see our good works (compare Matthew 5:14–16). The good deeds the Christian does, though not done to be noticed, will be noticed in most situations. We all want our congregation to be known not simply as “the church that assembles for Christ” but “the church that resembles Christ,” full of noble character and good deeds. The challenge is to keep our motives pure as our good deeds become known (Matthew 6:1–18).

***PRAYER***

*Almighty God, thank you for the blessing of being able to study this lesson and to see that all things really do work together for good to those who love you. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.*