

Gleaning in the Fields of Grace

When Fairytales Come True – Part V

Ruth 2:14-23

Introduction

The *Wisconsin State Journal* interviewed personnel managers of several of the nation's largest corporations and asked them to tell their most unusual experiences interviewing prospective employees. They responded with stories of some of the more interesting applicants who came to their offices to be interviewed for a job.

One applicant challenged the interviewer to arm wrestle – as if this had anything to do with getting the job.

Another applicant wore earphones to the interview and the interviewer could hear the music playing. When asked to remove them, the applicant explained it was no problem because he could listen to the interviewer and the music at the same time.

Another applicant, who was bald-headed, suddenly excused himself and then, came back a few minutes later wearing a full toupee.

One applicant said she had not had time for lunch and then, started to eat her hamburger and fries in the interviewer's office.

Then, there was the applicant who actually dozed off during the interview.

Finally, another applicant said he had never actually finished high school because he had been kidnapped and kept alive in a closet in Mexico.

Obviously, none of the above landed the jobs they were after.ⁱ

Grace has its limits, and these people exceeded the limit. When it comes to getting the job you believe

you deserve, it has nothing to do with grace anyway – it has to do with getting what you deserve, right?

For the average Christian who picks up the book of Ruth, one of the problems in appreciating the sheer beauty of this unfolding drama of grace is that it is assumed that everything that happens to Ruth is something she deserved.

- “Well, of course she lands in the fields of Boaz”;
- “Of course he’s smitten by her beauty” – even though nowhere in the book of Ruth is she physically described;
- “Of course he takes pity on her”;
- “Of course he gives her the keys to the kingdom”;
- “Of course he treats her with kindness; she deserves every bit of it.”

The truth is that Ruth deserves none of the favor Boaz will show her. She is an outsider, a foreigner, a former idolater turned convert, and a destitute woman with nothing to offer the prince but gratitude.

This is the rich truth of God's grace.

Grace is undeserved, unmerited favor. Grace is God condescending to us, not because we deserve it, but because He is gracious.

Grace is God choosing us, not because we were the best applicant for the job, at the head of the class, or stood out above everybody else. No, as Paul wrote,

. . . God [chose to be] rich in mercy [toward us], because of His great love with which He loved us,

even when we were dead in our transgressions, He made us alive together with Christ . . .

so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

(Ephesians 2:4-7)

What you are about to witness in the fields of Bethlehem is nothing less than the riches of grace shown in sheer kindness toward someone most unlikely and certainly undeserving.

Ruth will literally be gleaning in the fields of grace.

Principles of Grace

Now, we will look at six principles, each of which will begin with the word “grace.” They will simply describe a facet of grace that we see played out in flesh and blood, between Boaz – who is an illustration of Christ – and Ruth – who is an illustration of the believer; the bride of Christ.

1. Principle #1: Grace takes the initiative and always makes the first move.

Notice in chapter 2, verses 8-9, it is Boaz who speaks first to Ruth. With kindness he says,

. . . “Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids.

“Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw.”

In this culture, Boaz is immediately seen as acting with grace toward Ruth – a foreigner; a stranger; someone low on the rungs of society.

My wife and I had the privilege, a couple of years ago, of touring some of the sites throughout London and even in part of Scotland. Of course we saw several palaces of Queen Elizabeth II and were told that whenever the queen was in residence, her flag would be flying above the palace. We decided to

visit one particular palace and walked along the street leading up to it. We stood outside the massive, gated entrance, which was, of course, locked – we tried it – and looked through the wrought iron gate. We knew the queen was in because we saw her flag flying above the palace roof.

Now just imagine if Queen Elizabeth were to suddenly appear at the doorway, wave at us, and then come over to the gate and shake our hands and say, “I decided to come out here and have a chat with you straightaway.”

This would not happen without a massive breach of protocol. Queens do not talk to peasants. They might get a wave or a nod, but that would be all.

This reminds me of the senator who recently got a phone call from President-elect Obama. She hung up on him. He called her back and introduced himself again. She hung up on him again. She thought it was a gag. I watched her being interviewed, and she said, “I don’t get phone calls from the President!”

Who would expect a call from the President or from the Queen of England unless – what? – unless they deserved it; unless they had done something heroic; unless they were worthy.

Do we take for granted this stunning announcement?

God . . . in these last days has spoken to us by His Son . . . (Hebrews 1:1-2)

Grace is God speaking to unworthy, less than heroic peasants; illustrated centuries before the coming of Christ by Boaz speaking to Ruth. And it was no less remarkable in their culture than it would be in our culture for the Queen to talk to us at her palace gate.

The second principle of grace expands on this.

2. Principle #2: Grace surprises us with provision and protection.

Notice that after Boaz rehearses to Ruth what he will provide for her, her first sentence to him, in verse 10, is one of disbelief. She cannot believe his kindness. She cannot comprehend his care. In fact, do not miss that the very first word Ruth says to Boaz in their very first conversation is the word, “Why?!”

“Why? Why have you done this for me?”

The recipient of grace is always surprised because they know they are undeserving. Ruth did not say, “I knew I’d catch your eye . . . I knew you’d single me out.” Oh no, far from it.

I am fairly convinced that when we arrive in heaven, see the splendor of His preparation on our

behalf, begin to grasp our eternal role as the bride of Christ, and kneel at the feet of our Boaz, the first word we may say to our Kinsman Redeemer is this same word, “Why?”

“Why would You do all this for me?”

This is the principle of grace. The recipient is left nearly speechless as grace dawns upon the shadows of their mind.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me,

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.ⁱⁱ

3. Principle #3: Grace is willing to play the role of servant to the unworthy.

Now, there is a lapse in time between Boaz and Ruth’s first conversation that ended in verse 13, and their next conversation in verse 14.

Ruth evidently goes off to spend the rest of the morning gleaning in the fields. There is no doubt that she is amazed at this incredibly kind landowner.

However, it is now time for lunch, and Ruth, as Boaz has already instructed her, sits outside the circle, but near enough to get water to drink. Perhaps she is munching on raw grain that she has gathered in the field – if she has anything to eat at all.

Now Boaz has been watching for this moment – the timing was perfect. Notice the first part of verse 14.

At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar.” . . .

This implies that Ruth does not have any bread of her own. Boaz effectively asks her to eat with him.

We could call this their first date. This was the original Outback restaurant.

Not that unusual . . . he met her that morning and invited her to lunch with him the same day.ⁱⁱⁱ

Okay, so it was a group date – but it was a start.

Do not take this moment for granted. Ruth would have been amazed all over again. A gleaner was one step away from begging on the street corner; in fact, they were so poor that a satisfactory meal was an unexpected blessing.^{iv}

Verse 14 informs us that Ruth was invited to take some of their bread and dip it into their vinegar-based sauce, which was customary for this culture. But then it gets even better. Notice the last part of verse 14 carefully.

. . . So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left.

Boaz served her cooked grain. From his own skillet, he knelt down and, according to their custom, brushed some roasted kernels, probably onto Ruth’s mat, or into her lap.

Did their eyes meet? Did they both blush by the obvious implication of this spontaneous kindness?

You had better believe it! The other reapers and Boaz’s employees are watching every moment – probably thinking, “Maybe we should leave these two alone.”

Ruth eats and the text implies that she rose to go back to gleaning while the rest of the employees were still sitting there. It is possible that she was a bit too embarrassed at the curious looks and the wondering glances in her direction.

No one had missed this moment. Boaz, the prince, had treated a servant girl as if she were a member of his closest circle of friends.

The prince had taken the role of servant and provided for an impoverished woman. What grace.

4. Principle #4: Grace works behind the scenes to provide for the beloved.

As soon as Ruth gets up and leaves, Boaz adds more shock to his stunned friends and co-workers. Notice verses 15-16.

When she rose [that is, left] to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her.

“Also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her.”

“It is obvious that this is not normal behavior, Boaz. Are you saying you want us to basically throw grain in her path?”^v

“Yes!”

“C’mon, just ask her to marry you. It’ll be easier on all of us. Get it over with.”

Boaz says, “Oh no, there are two more chapters in this book – slow down.”

Can you imagine Ruth as she continues to work, not knowing that special provisions and specific instructions have been made on her behalf? She works away, unaware. We have every indication that she is oblivious to what is happening.

We too are most often oblivious to grace and the work of God behind the scenes. Every once in a while we catch a clue or a hint of our Groomsman, but most often we work, oblivious to His hand behind the scenes, as He is busy on our behalf.

Let me add quickly, at this point, another principle.

5. Principle #5: Grace does not eliminate a response of diligence and discipline.

God works in us to will and do of His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13); God works everything out for us (Romans 8:28), but God also works with us, as Mark 16:20 says, “And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them . . .” God works in us, for us, and with us.^{vi}

Notice verses 17-18a.

So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barely.

She took it up and went into the city . . .

Understand this – she did not ask Boaz for a ride, she did not ask the servants to beat out the barely, and she did not ask someone to carry what amounted to twenty-five pounds of grain back to the city.

Warren Wiersbe commented on this scene by repeating the Latin proverb that says, “Providence assists not the idle.”^{vii}

Another author wrote, “Even God won’t steer a parked car.”

This is the principle of collaboration. Ruth went out to work and Boaz was working everything out.

In many ways, this illustrates the work of the church – the bride of Christ. We toil to advance the gospel and we work to make disciples.

Jesus Christ said,

. . . “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” (Matthew 9:37)

J. Vernon McGee quipped in his little commentary on this text, “So many Christians sing at the top of their lungs, ‘We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves,’ and then go out and do nothing.”^{viii}

This is like the old gospel song that has the Lord saying, “My house is full, but my field is empty. Who will go and work for me today?”

Ruth is in need of help from God, and she is willing to work for God as God allows.

Now, after a very long day, Ruth arrives home exhausted, but satisfied.

Perhaps lately, you have been able to identify with Ruth. Maybe you are working hard in some ministry; perhaps juggling the time demands of two jobs; facing challenges on the campus or at the corporate scene where you are striving for excellence in order to glorify Christ; undergoing strenuous tests of your faith; maybe raising a brood of children to love Christ, and you pillow your head at night, exhausted, but satisfied. Or maybe you are just exhausted and not so satisfied because there is still so much to do!

Grace often goes about its business in need of a nap.

Have you noticed that very often it is the Christians you can count on to carry out some responsibility that are the ones who already seem to have so much of it?

Let us not take grace for granted. Literally, let us not take it sitting down, so to speak. The apostle Paul cheers us on in Romans 12:11, saying,

[Do] not lag behind in diligence, [be] fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;

Should the rapture happen any day now, may our Lord find us in need of rest.

- Grace takes the initiative and makes the first move;
- Grace surprises us with provision and protection;
- Grace plays the role of servant to the unworthy;
- Grace often works behind the scenes to provide for the beloved;
- Grace does not eliminate a response of diligence and discipline.

Let me give one more principle of grace, gleaned from the fields of Boaz.

6. Principle #6: Grace at work in one person’s life has a way of giving grace to another.

Note in verse 17, Ruth has this ephah of barley, which, by the way, is enough grain to live on for at least a month, weighing twenty to thirty pounds. Now notice verse 18.

She took it up and went into the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also took it out and gave Naomi what she had left after she was satisfied.

This is a reference to some of the cooked meal that Ruth had left over. Naomi is now, without

having to do anything at the moment, able to eat a meal herself. Continue to verses 19-20.

Her mother-in-law then said to her, "Where did you glean today and where did you work? May he who took notice of you be blessed." . . .

Trust me, he will be!

. . . 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."

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed of the Lord who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead." Again Naomi said to her, "The man is our relative, he is one of our closest relatives."

In other words, literally, ". . . he is a potential kinsman redeemer."

One look at twenty-five pounds of barley and Naomi is hearing wedding bells. This is the first time in the book that Naomi is praising God.

The grace of God in Ruth's life has spilled over into Naomi's life.

Do not misunderstand this. Naomi's joy is not based on Ruth, or on Ruth's testimony or experience. In the same way, our hope is not in someone else's experience or testimony.

The key point to see in this is that Naomi has hope in Boaz – who Boaz was, what Boaz had said, and what Boaz could do!

What a formula this is for Christian joy. We do not hope in anyone else or anything else. Our hope is in who Christ is – we hope in what Christ has done and we hope in what Christ has promised to do for us, His beloved.

So Ruth returns the next day to the fields of Boaz – which have become fields of grace. Verse 23 tells us that she would . . .

. . . glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. . . .

This would have been around seven weeks.

Did Ruth and Boaz eat lunch together again? You had better believe it! We are not told, but we can easily imagine it.

At the end of the harvest, Ruth and Boaz are deeply in love.

Conclusion

Before we leave this scene for now, let me give two more truths about grace.

1. First, grace does not deal sporadically in our lives, it deals continuously.

Whether we notice it or not, grace is at work even now.

2. Secondly, we do not come in and out of the presence of grace – we live there.

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; (II Corinthians 9:8)

Ladies and gentlemen, we are surrounded by grace. Oh for eyes to see, for hearts to sense, and for minds to appreciate the grace of God at work in our lives.

Let us ask our Redeemer to help us see and sense His love and provision for us, the beloved, as we go about a new day with new pressures, new challenges, and new demands. Let us ask Him to help us appreciate and understand that we also, like Ruth, are gleaning in fields of grace.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/14/2008 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2008 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.

ⁱ The Wisconsin State Journal, "Parade" ed., <http://preachingtoday.com>.

ⁱⁱ John Newton, "Amazing Grace," (1760).

ⁱⁱⁱ J. Vernon McGee, Ruth: The Romance of Redemption (Thomas Nelson, 1981), p. 81.

^{iv} Robert L. Hubbard, The Book of Ruth (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 175.

^v A. Boyd Luter, God Behind the Seen (Baker Books, 1995), p. 52.

^{vi} Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Committed (Victor Books, 1993), p. 30.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 29.

^{viii} McGee, p. 82.