
What the Story of Ruth Teaches Us About Work and Poverty

By Darrow Miller

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Poverty is rooted in lies at the level of culture. One of the greatest causes of poverty in the world is the lie that “Work is a curse!” This lie is manifest globally in the lives of individuals, communities and nations. Yes, you read that correctly. The economic poverty of nations can most often be traced to the cultural lie that work is a curse.

Economic historians often trace the rise of wealthy nations to the impact of the “Protestant Work Ethic,” as articulated by the German social philosopher **Max Weber**. (See David Landes’s classic *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*.)

A regionally famous Puerto Rican Salsa Band, the Grand Combo, recorded a song “I Do Nothing” which promotes laziness and machismo culture. This song impacted Puerto Rico economically, increasing poverty in the commonwealth. (Go [here](#) to see the story of the impact of popular music to shape culture and the corresponding economy.)

Prior to the Reformation in Europe, virtually every nation in the world was impoverished. Of course most nations had wealthy families: aristocrats, land owners, royalty. But the masses were impoverished, often indentured servants, serfs or slaves. Those countries impacted by the Reformation were lifted out of poverty. The key: shifting the cultural understanding of work as a curse to work as part of human dignity.

After all, in Genesis 2:2 we see that God works: “By the seventh day God had finished the **work** he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his **work**.” In Genesis 2:15 we read that man was put in the garden to work it: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to **work** it and take care of it.” This was before the fall.

These passages reveal that work is both a reflection of God’s transcendent nature, in whose image we are created, and that human beings were made to work, to steward creation and govern the things that God has made.

The problem is that pastors begin teaching, and Christians reading, at Genesis 3. I call such folks “Genesis Three Christians.”

When we begin in Genesis 3 we see that man's rebellion had consequences for work. Now a woman's labor in childbirth – her work – would be more difficult, and man would work in the sweat of his brow; weeds would grow in the garden. It is important, however, to realize that work is not cursed, it is the ground that is cursed (Genesis 3: 17).

The Bible clearly teaches that work is part of our dignity. As the gospel goes forward, so too must the biblical understanding of the dignity of work. It is this understanding, at a cultural level, that sets the framework for human flourishing.

Work is not a curse ... it is part of our dignity!

Since man's rebellion against God, natural evil has reigned. Earthquakes, floods, droughts, tsunamis and famine have been part of life. Famine is considered one of the greatest of natural disasters, and famines have occurred all over the world in all ages of history. Some have been man made, and some have been caused by nature.

The Bible records many accounts of famines. Most people are familiar with the great Egyptian famine in Genesis 41. Joseph warned Pharaoh that after seven bountiful years the land would suffer seven years of drought. Joseph recommended saving food during the good years to have provisions in the bad years. Thus the principle of savings was introduced to the world.

The book of Ruth mentions another famine which becomes the backdrop for establishing another biblical principle: the dignity of work.

Following the death of Josiah came the time of the judges, a period of moral and economic decline for the people of Israel. Twice we read, *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.* (Jdg 17:6; 21:25 ESV) During this period, a major famine struck Israel (Ruth 1:1).

As the famine turned brutal, an Ephrathite named Elimelech took his wife and two sons to neighboring Moab to find relief (1: 1-2). While there the sons married Moabite women. During a period of ten years, all three males died leaving their widows destitute (1:3).

Elimelech's wife, Naomi, urged her daughters-in-law to return to their families and find new husbands. But Ruth refused to abandon Naomi, articulating one of the most beautiful testimonies in the scriptures:

*Do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from following you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you stay, I will stay. **Your people shall be my people and your God my God.** Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and worse, if anything but death separates you and me! (1: 16-17)*

When her mother-in-law freed her to go back to her family Ruth was faced with a choice between fatalism and freedom, between the Moabite, child-eating god Molech, and the life-giving God, Jehovah. Ruth declared faith in Naomi's God and pledged her faithfulness to Naomi and her people. Ruth's hauntingly beautiful and defiant words still thrill us: "Your people shall be my people and your God my God."

We see in Ruth the self-sacrificing character that marks the nature of the God of Israel. God is *ISH* –husband, to his people Israel. He is faithful to them even when they are unfaithful to him. God's faithfulness and self-sacrificing love are rooted deeply in this young righteous Gentile. Her faith resulted in her entry in the royal genealogy of David's throne (Matt 1:5).

When Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, the people hardly recognized Naomi (1: 19). She voices her despair and bitterness from the deaths of her husband and sons.

But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi [meaning "Pleasant"]. Call me Mara [meaning "Bitter"], because the Almighty has brought great bitterness to me. I was full when I left, but the Lord has caused me to return empty. Why should you call me Naomi when the Lord has opposed me? The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me!" (1:20-21)

The Bible is realistic. It presents real people in real-life situations.

Most of us read the Bible for spiritual refreshment and principles. But how often do we read the Bible to find principles that deal with current issues, like hunger and poverty?

How did Ruth, the righteous Gentile respond to this same destitution? After all, she was in the same circumstances as Naomi.

And what did Boaz, the gentleman farmer, do to help her?

Naomi heard that the famine had lifted in Israel, so she and Ruth returned to her village.

Hebrew law required the land owner to leave part of the harvest for the poor to glean (Lev. 19:9; 23:22). So Ruth joined the gleaners in the field of Boaz, a relative of her deceased father-in-law (Ruth 2: 1-8).

What can we learn from Boaz's response to this Moabite woman?

1. He recognized this "foreigner" and greeted her as "My daughter" (2:8). We see here a welcoming term of endearment for a fellow human being who was both a stranger and impoverished. Boaz did not shun her or consider her inferior. No, he made room for her in the circle of his community. This is reminiscent of Christ addressing women as "daughter" (Mark 5:34) and "child" (Luke 8:54). He was welcoming and inclusive, not shunning and dismissive, toward the impoverished foreigner. Boaz understood the heart of God that years later would become incarnate in the person of Christ.
 2. He asked Ruth to join with the men and women of his household who were involved in the harvesting. He offered protection and sustenance while she worked (2:8-9).
 3. In response to Ruth's question of why she had found favor in his sight, he replied that it was because her self-sacrificial love for Naomi and the fact that she, had in faith, identified herself with the God of Israel "under whose wings you have come to take refuge." (2:10-12)
 4. Ruth humbly recognizes Boaz's godly character in the way he has treated her (2:13).
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5. Boaz welcomed Ruth, a poor, hungry refugee, into his household; he had her sit at his table and then he served her.

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. (2:14)

What is this? He served her! Normally it is the poor who serve the wealthy, the woman who serves the man. Did Boaz get it backwards?

No, Boaz understands the nature of God and His kingdom. As the successful farmer, he has a responsibility to help those less prosperous than himself. As a man, he is to serve the woman. No male chauvinism here. Here is a man who understands that all people—including women, the poor, and marginalized—are to be treated with respect and dignity. Here is a gentleman.

Boaz responds to the immediate need by providing food for Ruth from his own table. Then he makes longer term provision as well.

As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, “Let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don’t rebuke her.” (2: 15-16)

6. Boaz cared about Ruth’s dignity. She was an impoverished refugee. While Boaz was concerned about her physical situation, he knew that the way he helped her would determine if she became poorer. Ruth still had her dignity. Boaz knew that he could strip her of her dignity if he was not careful in the way he helped her.

What would have been the easiest thing for Boaz to do? What would have been easiest for him and for Ruth? Boaz could have simply ordered one of his harvesters to go to the field and bring back some of the harvested barley for Ruth. Providing for Ruth directly would have been the easiest for everyone concerned. But Boaz was not ruled by “easy,” nor by the pragmatic! He also was not motivated by his feelings, by what would make him feel good. No, he was interested in Ruth’s well-being, concerned for her physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.

He recognized that to really help Ruth required more than simply giving her food. She needed an opportunity to work. That would be more costly for himself, for his workers, and for Ruth. So he ordered his servants to go out to the field and take “some of the stalks ... from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up.”

In fact, the harvest was already in progress. The grain had been cut, left to dry, and then bundled to prepare for transportation to the threshing floor. But Boaz ordered his men to take some of the grain out of the bundles and lay it back on the ground, so that Ruth could work.

Boaz did not give Ruth food directly, he gave her an opportunity to work, to provide for her own needs and the needs of Naomi.

And what did Ruth do in response to Boaz's thoughtful kindness and provision?

She worked.

*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. 2:17-18*

She was a refugee and probably weak from her years of hunger, but Ruth took advantage of the opportunity Boaz had given her. She gathered and threshed the barley and then transported the grain back to town where she and Naomi were staying. This was the midterm supply to meet their needs.

Ruth refused to simply accept her fate. She rebelled against her circumstances of hunger and poverty, rejecting the fatalism of her Moabite animistic culture. Ruth lived as a free woman in the shadow of the wings of the living God.

Ruth had worked all day and into the evening to make provision for herself and her mother-in-law. And she provided for Naomi's immediate need for food: she gave Naomi what she had left over from the meal at Boaz's home.

How did Naomi respond to what Ruth had done?

*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. (2: 19)*

Naomi did not ask Ruth where she got food. What question did she ask? "Where did you work?"

Poverty in the life of an individual or community will not be solved without recognizing the dignity of work. If work is a curse, if the goal is to live without working, the question becomes "Where did you get the food?" But in a more comprehensive framework, the question is "Where did you work?"

Note Ruth's response. She identified the place where she had been working and the man with whom she had worked. Note as well that Boaz, the landowner, was working in the fields. Just because he was a wealthy landowner he might have relaxed. But work is part of human dignity. Not only did Ruth work, so did Boaz.

And finally, Naomi recognizes the role that Boaz is playing in their lives.

*"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 **guardian-redeemers**." (2:20)*

Boaz is part of the Ephrathite clan and a distant relative of Naomi's husband. As such he plays the part of the kinsman redeemer for Ruth and Naomi. This term refers to a relative who has a moral and legal responsibility to help extended family members in difficult straits (see Lev. 25:25-55).

In an era of moral bankruptcy, Boaz stood out as a godly man. He fulfilled his responsibility to care for the poor by providing gleanings from his field. The fruits of his labor and his fields were to be shared. He also took seriously his bond as a kinsman redeemer to take Ruth and Naomi under his wing.

Naomi's life is restored because of the selflessness of Ruth and Boaz. She moves from hopelessness to happiness, from being empty to being filled, from being at serious risk of starvation to food security (1 1-5, 21, 3:17, 4:13-17).

This is the lesson that economic historians have recognized. It is the biblical concept of work that lifts people and communities out of poverty.

Good intentions do not help the poor. Often they create dependency and greater poverty. True service helps the poor in ways that allow their dignity to remain intact, or to be restored, and in a way that helps them to thrive, to move from poverty to flourishing. Boaz understood this and thus offered a way out of Ruth's poverty.

We need to create opportunity, to encourage entrepreneurship, a spirit of discovery and innovation. These are the attitudes that set people free to create wealth for their families and communities. Enterprise and human freedom are the keys to ending poverty.

A *heart* for the poor is essential but not adequate. We need to have a *mind* for the poor, to develop thoughtful activity that actually helps people create wealth. For more on these things see [this three-minute hard-hitting video](#) from the people at Poverty Cure.

How do we help the poor? Do our misguided good intentions end up actually increasing poverty? Do we do things that are easier for us and perhaps easier for those who are poor? Or do we work alongside people who are impoverished? Do we create opportunities for them to work and to create wealth?

The story of Ruth has much to teach us about these important questions.

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