



ADULT LESSON

Read the following excerpt from *Image Bearers* and discuss the follow up questions with your group:

God gives His adoptive children a mandate to care for the fatherless, but He doesn't leave us without a beautiful application on how to do this. He gives us this grand application through the book of Ruth.

Ruth is a widow, a stranger, an alien, and an orphan. Her vulnerability is compounded by each of these identities, and we can learn a great deal from how God meets her needs through His people. Looking at Ruth Chapter 1, we can gather some powerful context for our understanding.

We learn that an Israelite man named Elimelech takes his wife, Naomi, and his two sons from Israel to live among Moabites. A famine was ravishing the land of Israel, Elimelech takes matters into his own hands, and out of desperation moves into this enemy territory. To put it lightly, the Moabites and Israelites were fierce enemies and shared the current resentment of India and Pakistan.

While in Moab, Elimelech leads his sons to disobey the commandment of God to not intermarry with those of other faiths. Both sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. However, in short order, all of the men die and Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah are left as widows.

Naomi, knowing she has nothing to offer her daughters-in-law, orders them to return to their families because she is returning to Israel; however, Ruth has now committed herself to the God of Israel and to her mother-in-law. Ruth pledges her loyalty to Naomi in Ruth 1:16: "But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.'"

Don't miss the context of this passage that is quoted so many times in wedding ceremonies. This is not a man or woman pledging themselves to a wife or husband, but a daughter-in-law pledging herself to her mother-in-law.

This is radical.

Because of this radical abandon with which Ruth pledges herself she now represents the three vulnerable groups echoed throughout the Bible. She is a widow from losing her husband. She is a stranger/alien as she enters into enemy lands away from her citizenship in Moab. And practically, because she has left Moab and devoted herself to another God and people, she is functionally an orphan. This is the scene that precedes Ruth Chapter 2. In this chapter we see beautiful application of how to care for widows, strangers, and the fatherless. Remember as you read Ruth Chapter 2 that the story is told by a narrator. As a result, we are seeing things that Ruth doesn't yet see or know.

In Ruth 2 we read:

Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech. And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you!" And they answered, "The Lord bless you." Then Boaz said to a young man who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab." She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers." So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest. Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my

young women. Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn." Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" Then she said, "I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants."

And at mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. And she took it up and went into the city. Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied. And her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, "The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz." And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers." And Ruth the Moabite said,

"Besides, he said to me, 'You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest.'"

And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted." So she kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

Here we see that Boaz is a kinsman-redeemer of Ruth and Naomi. The kinsman-redeemer was a male relative who, according to the Law given to Israel by God, had the privilege and responsibility to act on behalf of a relative who was in danger or need. In God's great providence, Ruth had not wandered onto a random field, but the field of a man who feared God and followed the commands of God we see in Deuteronomy 24.

In this passage we see six distinct ways that Boaz cares for Ruth and thus a pattern for caring for the fatherless. Boaz sees Ruth's value and sees past her vulnerability. He doesn't just show charity to her but is intimate, loving and kind. Boaz cherishes Ruth as an image bearer and serves as a model for us.

First, we see that Boaz takes notice of Ruth. He comes back from his trip and approaches her with kindness, keeping his eye on her to make sure she is being treated fairly. Boaz doesn't avoid making contact, but enters into Ruth's world. We also must take notice of the fatherless, just as the Lord took notice of us. While we were yet sinners and outcast, Christ died for us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. —Romans 5:6-8

Because we of all people should know what it feels like for the God of the universe to take notice, in turn, we take notice of the fatherless.

Second, Boaz provides for Ruth's needs including food,

shelter, clothing, and essentials. Also, we see from the passage that this is not a one time showering of help which then leads to apathy, but a continuation of meeting needs. Boaz instructs his young men to allow her to take whatever she needs and to even leave out more for her to glean.

Are we making our fields available in the same way for the fatherless, the way that our Father has so richly provided for us? Do we respond reluctantly to the needs of the fatherless or do we seek to continually meet needs? We see in Matthew 6:25-34 that the Lord knows and provides for all of our essential needs on a continual basis. This is why the Lord tells us not to be anxious about tomorrow.

Third, Boaz affirms and blesses Ruth. He continually speaks words of kindness. The fatherless and their mothers live in a world of pain and rejection with the great fear of further loss. Boaz spoke affectionately and kindly to remind Ruth of her value to God. When we do this for others, it is like pouring rain on parched ground. God spoke His kind words of redemption to us and wooed us while we were far away.

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know Him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is. —1 John 3:1-12

Fourth, we observe how Boaz protects Ruth and advocates for her safety making her a priority, not a burden. With his young men, he sets up plans for her ongoing protection.

In the same way, let us not be burdened by the commands of God, but joyfully serve and protect the fatherless. In the same way that Jesus joyfully protects us from the wrath deserved because of our sin, we must advocate for them and for their safety.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for

the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. —Hebrews 12:1-4

Fifth, Boaz honors Ruth and brings her in to sit at his table with him. During this time, meals were intimate times of relationship, not utilitarian as they are today in the West. As an act of intimacy, not charity, Boaz honors Ruth by inviting her into his home to sit at his table.

In the same manner, let us love, honor, bless and invite the fatherless to our table. We do this in the same way that Jesus came to earth to seek and save the lost and to ultimately invite us in to dine with Him. Luke 19:10 says, *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”* And we see in the Song of Solomon 2:4 that *“He brought me to the banqueting table, and His banner over me is love.”*

Lastly and undeniably, we see Boaz redeems Ruth by inviting her into his family. He makes her a citizen, a wife, and a child of a family. We see this all recorded in Ruth 4 and learn that Ruth's children would be in the line of King David and ultimately the lineage of the long awaited Messiah. After a PG-13 scene in Ruth 2, we see in Ruth 4 that Boaz proceeds to the city center and makes it known that he desires to redeem Ruth, to marry her, and bring her into his family. The adoptive love Boaz has for Ruth mirrors the adoptive love our Heavenly Father has for us!

Ultimately, we know that the defender of the fatherless is the Lord. We rest knowing that the hope of the oppressed, fatherless, and the widow is not in us, but in the Lord. Psalm 68:5-6 says, *“God is the Father of the fatherless and protector of widows. He settles the solitary in a family and leads out the neglected to prosperity.”*

We see that while the Book of Ruth offers plentiful practical insight into the way we care for the fatherless, it equally serves to foreshadow the mercy, grace, justice and love which flows from the ultimate kinsman-redeemer, Jesus. When we participate in the mercy of the justice of the Kingdom, then we are showing and displaying the glory of God.

Isaiah 58:9-11 says,

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, "Here I am." If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

Ministry to the fatherless has consistently been the way of the Church. Unfortunately, today we are allowing the government and secular non-governmental organizations to attempt to perform the job given to the Church.

In A.D. 125 Aristides, an Athenian statesman, said about the Church,

They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting.

Beloved, we cannot truly say we are pro-life if we abandon our God-given role to care for the fatherless. When we fail to intervene on behalf of the fatherless, we are showing a secular and dying world that we are more interested in birth than life. On the contrary, the gospel of Christ shows believers that we are not the rescuers of these children—we are the rescued. We have so lavishly been loved by Christ in our despair and rescued from our sin. As a result we are compelled to care for the orphan, the widow, the poor, the needy, and the alien.

So why did we, the Church as God's people, stop caring for the vulnerable? I believe there are many plausible reasons. **First, it was the lack of voice of the fatherless.** We live in such a distracted time and age. The technology age has certainly brought many blessings of convenience and efficiency, but it has also ushered in an age of seclusion and busyness. We fill our

calendars with activity, but ultimately live in a world of obscurity. The fatherless have no voice and no standing. As a result, they are vulnerable. When the Church isn't aggressively and actively seeking gospel-driven justice, it makes it a lot more sanitary to avoid and ignore the injustice around us.

Another reason the Church stopped caring for the fatherless is government intervention on a broad scale. When the church became preoccupied and stopped seeking to do justice for the fatherless, the government stepped in and filled the void, realizing that there was a major social problem that must be addressed. In almost every country in the world you will find orphan-ages and organizations which are serving the fatherless from a Christian background; however, many of these are now relics of the old or have been taken over by the government.

We cannot resent the government for stepping in, but we must mourn that we turned a blind eye. If the Church wants to reinsert itself around the world, it must first serve the system in humility. Also, we must pray for government workers and ask the Lord for avenues to re-engage the system with opportunities to intervene. We must remember that it is much easier to lose a responsibility than to regain it.

Furthermore, the Church stopped caring for the fatherless because of a weak theology which led to a "prosperity theology." The prosperity theology states that you can live your best life now and that following Jesus means physical blessing and comfort. It is antithetical to the prosperity gospel to serve the fatherless and vulnerable. Contrary to a life of ease and comfort, many adoptive and foster parents will tell you stories of heartache, heartbreak, difficulty, sleepless nights, and thoughts of hopelessness.

The vulnerable, stranger, and fatherless all live in darkness, and so when we take the light of the gospel to them we can expect that the adversary will counterattack. And these attacks are harsh. You see, the fatherless live in a world of all types of pain, trauma, abuse, and neglect. When we enter into their world, we are bringing their hurt and pain into our lives.

This pain is uncomfortable and it certainly is incongruent to a theology that says that in Christ there is only blessing and prosperity. If we are living only for comfort and blessing in this world then we will naturally avoid things that are difficult and heartbreaking. The prosperity theology/gospel is in stark conflict with caring for the fatherless.

The true biblical gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ; however, is not in conflict with our mission to care for the fatherless. As a matter of fact, the gospel is the very reason that we care for orphans.

We cannot ignore the physically poor and downtrodden around us. We cannot fall into these mistakes, but must be people who are vigilant about preaching the gospel to the spiritually bankrupt, as well as showing the gospel to the physically poor. Our theology will affect our biography. What we believe about God will affect the way we act, live, and worship.

Theologian A.W. Tozer said, *"The most important thing about you is what you think about God."*

We don't have a shortage today on teaching the Word, especially in the U.S., but we do have a shortage of application and mobilization. We need not only talk the talk, but begin walking out justice for the physically and socially poor. Doing orphan care and other forms of justice is about reflecting the very heart of the gospel, and we do it to honor and reflect the glory of God which has come to redeem us.

Bible teacher and author Kay Arthur of Precept Ministries International defines the call to reflect the glory of God in such a profound way. She says, *"We are to live in such a way as to give all of creation a correct opinion or estimate of who God is."*

The Apostle Paul says it this way to the church at Corinth in 2 Corinthians 5:20: *"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."*

So beloved, we are called to join the work of the Lord in bringing liberty to the captives, healing to the sick and blind, and bringing validation to the fatherless. The

gospel shows us who we really are. Our adoption is not based on the fact that we were cute, attractive, or worthy, but it is based on the sovereign grace of God set out before the beginning of the world. Our adoption is based on the fact that He is worthy.

Friend in Christ, you have a Father who is pursuing you and marked you out before the foundation of the world. Just as in physical adoption and orphan care, there is nothing a child can do to be chosen or to advocate for themselves. They need the right person, with the right pedigree, and the right resources to look after them. The Author, Sustainer, and Creator of the universe who has sought after our souls. He is most assuredly the right one with perfect pedigree and unlimited resources.

These facts propel us to engage in defending the fatherless. But, practically speaking, how can our churches begin ministering to the fatherless?

1. We can minister through adoption ministry which involves assisting families exploring adoption; helping families fund adoption; and supporting families before, during, and after the adoption.
2. We can participate in foster care ministry which includes recruiting and training foster families; recruiting and training respite families; and caring for families who take foster care placements by prayer, acts of service, and reminding them of the promises of God. We can begin to minister to workers in the government system, the government, and non-believing foster families.
3. We can also begin participating in strategic orphan care. This includes ministering to caregivers in institutions; minimizing developmental deficits by utilizing tutoring programs, education programs, and therapy; teaching and mentoring older orphans with job and life skills; helping with transitional assistance for older orphans who are aging out; and developing programs for reunification of

orphans into their biological families through gospel intervention.

4. Ministry to the fatherless also looks like getting engaged with birthparent and reunification ministry. We bring the gospel to bear in the family of origin when we help families who are struggling and at risk of losing their kids by teaching about biblical family and parenting. We should always seek reunification and not focus all of our attention on the fatherless while ignoring their families of origin.

Equally important, we need to make caring for the fatherless a regular focus of preaching. Every November the global church participates in an initiative called

“Orphan Sunday,” on the second Sunday of the month. Our churches need to participate in Orphan Sunday or set aside another regular time to preach about gospel-driven justice for the fatherless. Lifeline is excited to provide resources each year including videos, Bible study lessons, and other materials to help your church with Orphan Sunday. Please visit www.lifelinechild.org/orphan-sunday to get your free resources.

Beloved, we all are called to care. We are all commanded to use our lives to engage with the marginalized and the fatherless. So the question is, following the commands of the Bible, what will we do? We must remember that James 1:27 is a call not only to adoption, but a call to be continually engaged with the orphan.

Follow-Up Questions

- What is the chief need of every child, man, woman? How do we know this?
- Who is responsible for caring for vulnerable children? Where is this command given?
- How is Ruth considered an orphan in different ways in Chapter 1?
- Boaz takes notice of Ruth upon return from his trip. He looks after her to ensure she is properly cared for. How does he do this? How many times does he do this?
- Boaz is seen blessing and affirming Ruth. Why does this matter to Ruth?
- How can you take notice of the vulnerable children around you?
- Boaz advocates for Ruth in the town. What does advocating for the fatherless look like to you?
- In what ways do we seemingly make the priorities and well-being of others a burden instead of a priority?
- As Boaz invites Ruth to dinner, to sit at his table (not someone else's), what do you think she was feeling? How did that impact her self-esteem and sense of worth?
- Lastly, Boaz invites Ruth to be a part of his family. This is a life-altering moment for Ruth. What does this mean for her?
- In what ways can you (and your church) practically care for the vulnerable?
- Why is it important that each of us is involved in caring for orphans and vulnerable children in our community, and around the world?
- If we ignore the call to care for the fatherless, we ignore a direct command from the Lord. Can we afford to look past this command?