

Dear Friends,

We cannot question or doubt that, in the scales of eternal relationship and destiny, all children of God are undeserving in their own right. Scripture makes that point crystal clear. However, Scripture makes equally clear that the Lord looks with kind, loving, and tender grace upon His children who willingly, joyfully, and faithfully choose to serve Him by serving others. Few lessons in Scripture rise to the rich heights of the story of Ruth in this point. When her husband died, Ruth was a young woman. She could have understandably told her mother-in-law goodbye, and gone her way to make another family, and to live another life. Instead, she lovingly aligned herself with Naomi, left her homeland, and joined Naomi in her native Israel. Once there, Ruth quickly busied herself earning food for the two widows. She worked long and tirelessly in this pursuit. Soon Boaz, a wealthy landowner, noticed her and quickly respected her hard, diligent work in the fields. He was a relative of Naomi's, so he had a personal interest in knowing that Naomi was well fed.

When Boaz and Ruth finally met and talked, Boaz spoke these prophetic words to Ruth. And the remainder of the Book of Ruth documents that Boaz spoke truth. The Lord indeed intervened and richly rewarded Ruth. A fascinating reality to the rewards the Lord sends upon His faithful, self-less children appears in this lesson. ***Ruth was not seeking a reward.*** She was busy doing what was right and good for her mother-in-law.

You need not look long or hard in today's twisted world to find a very sincere professing Christian who will wax eloquent in telling you how hard they are working for the sole purpose of gaining a reward when they get to heaven. This attitude sounds a loud dissonant clash to Ruth's attitude in our study lesson.

If we follow the teaching of Scripture, our present faithful lifestyle is not at all to be about self or personal gain. It is to glorify and to magnify the Lord for His goodness so richly and faithfully poured out upon us. I am sadly persuaded that today's populist Christian culture would be far more effective in honoring the Lord if they forgot about gaining that personal reward and started looking for the Naomis in their lives who need their service and help.

Look around your circle of friends. How many such Naomi types enrich the landscape of your world? And how much have you said or done to ease their load, to provide for their needs, to bless them? Jesus set the mold for honorable service, "***It is more blessed to give than to receive.***" But when do I get to have my way? Which do you regard as more important, your way or the Lord's way? Which honors the Lord more, His way or your way? Where are the Naomi types in your life? What have you done recently to honor them for their love and encouragement, so faithfully given to you when you needed it most?

Love in Jesus,
Joe Holder

God Rewards Those Who do not Seek Reward

The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, ?under whose wings thou art come to trust. (Ruth 2:12 KJV 1900)

A study of the little Book of Ruth can teach us so many wise and godly lessons. Perhaps

our present study may serve to expand that list. I can't imagine the number of people I've known in my lifetime who quite openly boasted about how hard they were working to gain their reward in heaven when they died. Little did they realize, if they had only spent more time with their heart engaged in their study of Scripture, no one in heaven shall be singing, "I did it my way." Nor will anyone be looking in mirrors at the size of their crowns or their "Rewards." In Revelation, John was permitted to "Listen in" on that heavenly song, and every number he heard them singing was about Jesus and what He did for them, not one note about what they did for themselves. Biblical rewards, so often taught in Scripture, belong with believers in the here and now, not in the hereafter. We shall learn a seldom noted principle in our study of this verse from Ruth.

The story of loving, unselfish Ruth warms the heart and reminds us that the Lord has occasionally placed similar people in our lives to remind us just how noble and caring the Lord's people can be. They inspire us to work at being more like them!

Ruth, a recent widow, freely chooses to travel with her grieving mother-in-law back to her homeland. Rather than a sad farewell, followed by beginning to make a new life for herself, Ruth thinks far more of taking care of her aging mother-in-law than of herself.

As we set our minds for this beautiful lesson, it would be wise for us to tightly anchor some unique words from Jesus in our minds.

*I have showed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, **It is more blessed to give than to receive.*** (Acts 20:35)

Ruth's life personified those pure delightful words, "***It is more blessed to give than to receive.***" In our crazy world today, how many lives—lives of dear people we know—are upside down, compared with Jesus' reminder? The task requires no prophet; every effort, every venture, shall fail in the end that does not build on this "Jesus-foundation" of giving over taking, of serving over being served.

By the time we read our study verse, Ruth and Naomi have been back in Israel for some time. Ruth has daily gone into the fields to gather the purposeful "Hands full" of grain that Jewish farmers left in their fields for their poor. She has been quietly noticed by Boaz, who instructed his reapers to leave some extra grain in her path. When Naomi discovered the unusual volume of grain that Ruth had gleaned during the day, she knew that someone was showing Ruth a favor.

The Lord recompense thy work. Often when people begin to discuss the Lord's assessment of our conduct, they paint every believer as a pathetic, depraved, helpless sinner who can only sin apart from divine intervention. These dear folks need to spend time with many Bible lessons such as the one before us. Not only did Boaz speak the words of this blessing to Ruth, but the Lord personally guided the interaction between Boaz and Ruth so that they eventually were married, and Ruth becomes part of Jesus' "Family tree." (First chapter of Matthew) People cannot wholly dismiss the many Bible lessons that speak of the Lord's smiling approval of our walk of faith, but they seem bent to make doubly sure to diminish every gracious act of faith by reminding you that it remains compromised by sin. If we fall into such a mindset, we need to visit Scripture and rehearse the Lord's amazing gracefulness toward His faithful children.

Folks, we live in a broken world full of broken people (One of my favorite Shafer terms). If we look in the mirror of our God's absolute sinless perfection, not one of us measures up. We agree! If we ponder the debt of our sins for which Jesus died, paying that debt in full, there can be no doubt. Scripture clearly and repeatedly affirms that we were bankrupt sinners who owed a debt far beyond our ability to pay. These verses which follow the pattern before us remind us of what we are in Jesus, not what we were without Him. There is a difference!

However, considering this verse, and so many others like it throughout the Bible that speak of the Lord's amazing love and kindness toward His children, including in many of those cases, His regard and special blessing upon them for their godly faith-walk lifestyle, there must be another Biblical principle at work that we are overlooking, and one that we desperately need to study. Think. If the Lord viewed Ruth as such an undeserving sinner, why did He bless Boaz to speak this formal blessing upon her, and, definitely, why did He follow Boaz's blessing by bringing it to pass in Ruth's life? If the Lord is about something so kind and blessing for His children who step outside themselves, and devote their lives to serving others, not to gaining service for themselves, we need to learn more about it.

...and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, ?under whose wings thou art come to trust. Did Boaz, Ruth, or even the inspired writer of Ruth, ever contradict Boaz's words? Never. In fact, the remainder of the Book of Ruth serves to document the Lord's fulfillment of this prophetic comment by Boaz. When Boaz spoke these words to Ruth, he had no thought or prayer for the Lord to "Reward" Ruth with a sack full of straw every day to the end of harvest, did he? He had a heart for the Lord to "Reward" her with a rich and special blessing that would serve to measure the Lord's smiling approval of her unselfish giving of her whole life to Naomi.

The Hebrew word translated "reward" in this verse is defined as wages, as payment for services rendered. I can hear the echo of someone loudly protesting that no believer ever is so pliant and obedient to the Lord as to truly earn wages for his/her obedience. I'll retire and allow these dear folks to argue with the inspired author of Ruth, and, in fact, most of the sixty-six books of the Bible. If such passages appear in our Bible, instead of arguing with God, and with His Book, we better honor Him by prayerfully studying to learn what He intended to teach us in those lessons.

I must wonder. When I read such passages as the one before us, and so many others that describe the Lord's tender, responsive graciousness toward His faithful children, I increasingly come to think that the Lord may well look upon His beloved children in their faith-walk with a different (Not contradictory) perspective. Let me illustrate.

If we consider the criminal statutes of a given state in our country, say, the crime of first degree murder, that crime will be quite clearly defined. All the necessary circumstances and motives will be addressed in the law. Thus, if someone is arrested and tried for murder, we should expect the court to follow the pattern of trial and evidence set forth in the law. And, should the jury find the accused person guilty as charged, we will reasonably expect the court to sentence that man to the prescribed prison time.

However, since we are visiting an imaginary court building, let's pause while there and visit some other "Courts." Let's walk into the room identified as "Family Court." We see couples and their attorneys discussing—sometimes arguing heatedly—about property, continuing income, and likely child custody. All of these issues are quite normal for a Family Court, aren't they? However, do you hear a jury solemnly announce, "Guilty as charged?" at the end of the proceedings? Do you hear a judge pronounce decades long prison time for the "Accused"? No? Why? In this court, you are dealing with a very different kind of issues, and those issues require a very different mindset in the judge, as well as the attorneys and other staff in the room. You might often witness attorneys talking to each other, trying to reason through differences between the couple. However, in this court room, you never hear the death sentence pronounced against anyone, do you? In another room in this section of the court, you might enter a court room where attorneys are discussing with the judge the possible adoption of an orphaned child. The child was left alone by the death of his parents, and the court is trying to find the best home for this child.

I am not yet satisfied with my "Family court" setting. Let's make the whole situation much more intimate and personal. We quietly "Look over the fence" and witness a next-door family involved

in their daily activities. Mom and Dad are busy taking care of chores and plans, and the children are busy playing and enjoying each other's company. Then one of the children becomes angry at a sibling, and a quarrel breaks out. Question, what will Mom and Dad do? Will they call the police and have the angry child arrested? Taken to jail, and eventually appear in criminal court because of a minor squabble with a sibling? No! the punishment in this case simply does not fit the crime if there even is a "Crime" at all. What might wise and loving parents do to calm the situation? They might sit down and talk calmly and lovingly with each of the children, try to figure out what happened, and slowly talk both children down to restore a calm, loving climate between them. At that point, the kids return to their play, and the parents to their chores. Problem solved. Folks, we have just witnessed the most natural and wise process we could imagine in the real "Family Court" of a loving home. Mom and Dad had no desire, and definitely no reason, to even think about criminal laws, did they? No! Their objective was to maintain loving peace in their family.

Do you suppose, just for a moment, that the Lord might have wise and loving reasons to involve Himself often in our lives to soothe over ruffled emotions, and to restore loving harmony between His children, between members of His "Family"? In the Lord's judgment within His own "Family Court," He has no reason to bring up the "Death Penalty," does He? No, He is dealing with two of His beloved children, and His intent is to guide them to restored harmony with each other. He will do as little as possible to nudge that outcome. The more His own child can step up and do to restore this relationship the more our loving Father will smile.

Have you read Hebrews 12 and Paul's extended lesson on "Chastening"? What is "Chastening" anyway? Is it not a loving, involved parent working gently with His children to restore their mutual fellowship and harmony, or to restore a wayward child to the path of honor? I suggest that this "Parent Principle" appears quite often in Scripture, and we need to become far more familiar with it than we seem to be at present. In the setting of this spiritual family principle, Scripture frequently teaches us of the Lord's gentle, tender, "Good Shepherd" attentive and loving care for us. On these occasions, folks, it is time to act like a "Child of the King," not like a criminal attorney prosecuting a murder case. It is time to talk about the "Parent Principle" which the Lord shows toward His wayward children, not shout out news about the death penalty for sin.

In our study of the life of Ruth, we learn a fascinating point that we need to ponder. *Ruth never sought a "Reward" from the Lord.* Not once! When Boaz spoke words of assurance to Ruth, she was more surprised than expectant of his words. She had a full-time job gathering enough grain for herself and for Naomi, and that was her goal. The more she worked to care for Naomi the more she grew in Boaz's respect. And apparently the Lord agreed.

How goes it with you today? Are you hiding and pouting because you don't like what someone said or did to you? Are you steaming over how unfair something has been? The number of people with such a reaction to life is countless. You will definitely not be alone. However, this one little lady from our Bible, far back in the Old Testament, quietly steps up, taps us on the shoulder, and quietly whispers, "Remember. It is not about you. Somewhere God has planted a Naomi in your life. Work hard to take care of her. Trust the Lord to take care of you!"

Elder Joe Holder