

## Ruth, Part 1 – Can We Count on God to meet our Needs:

### Common Grace vs. Special Grace

#### *Pictures from the Book of Ruth*

Because of the spread of the coronavirus throughout most of the world, many areas seem to be in an apocalyptic scenario. In America, people seem to be living in a third world nation. State and local governments are ordering restaurants, bars, and cinemas to close. Restaurants are permitted to do only take-out business.

Stores of all kinds are compelled to close their doors to customers. Supermarkets work faithfully to restock shelves and calm panicked shoppers. Despite assurances from governmental officials and from the private sectors that there is no need to hoard food and supplies, people all over the world are doing just that: buying hand sanitizer, toilet paper and other products, thereby clearing store shelves of anything they might need, or think they may need.

The fact that most people seem to be ignoring the assurances that there are really no shortages indicates one obvious fact: most people do not believe that there are any guarantees that the things they need will be available.

And they are correct. No human being can possibly give assurances that everyone's needs will be provided.

Fortunately, there is a higher source of information who is not only correct but who is also omniscient, and that is of course, God who knows everything. So does God have anything to say regarding the issue of provision of needs during the coronavirus epidemic?

The answer, of course, is yes, God does indeed have something to tell us, and His message is given to us in the Bible, sometimes with direct statements, and sometimes in stories. Many true, historical accounts in the Bible reveal God's message to us through a story format in which we can easily see ourselves.

The Bible tells us that God does provide people's needs, but He does not provide for everyone in the same way or even with the same certainty. Yes, in the issue of providing needs, God does play favorites.

There is no better way to understand that distinction than in the Old Testament story of Ruth.

Here is the basic story of the book of Ruth:

Elimelech, a Jewish man, is married to Naomi, a Jewish woman, and they live in Bethlehem. They have two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. There is a famine around the area of Bethlehem, so they go to the foreign country of Moab.

While in Moab, both sons marry women from Moab, named Ruth and Orpah. Elimelech dies, and then the two sons Mahlon and Chilion also die.

So the family consists of Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law.

Shortly thereafter, Naomi decides to go back to Bethlehem. The two daughter-in-laws say "We will go with you." Naomi says "No, both of you should remain here with your own people."

Orpah decides to remain in Moab, but Ruth insists on accompanying Naomi to Bethlehem. Naomi and Ruth develop a mother--daughter type of relationship.

Once Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem they are confronted with a serious problem. There was a famine in Israel and people were concerned about having sufficient food and provisions. And, in this agriculturally based economy, jobs were scarce, especially for a woman.

Fortunately, God had provided a way to provide food for everyone. His method was called "gleaning", which was a system whereby farmers would leave some of their crops in the field after harvesting.

Basically, there were two ways in which the Law stated that crops were to be left during the harvest"

- Corners & Forgotten Areas - Though most of the fields were rectangular, they were plowed in a circular pattern so the corners were left unharvested. Reapers were not to go back and get the crops in those corners, nor were they to go to forgotten areas in the field. They were to leave both of these areas for the poor, the orphans, and the widows to glean.
- Additional Passes - When the reapers would pass through the field, the plump, good heads of grain would fall off fairly easily, and the lesser quality grain would remain on the stalk. The reapers were not to make additional passes to retrieve these remaining heads of grain. The poor, the widows, and the orphans could have the lesser (inferior) quality crops.

So when Naomi and Ruth arrive at Bethlehem the only viable option for their survival was for Ruth to go out to a grain field and glean. This begins a series of adventures in which Ruth was aware of some things, but there were other things happening in the heavenly realm of which she was totally unaware.

The first heavenly intervention lay in the field she had ostensibly chosen as a place to glean.

**Ruth 2:3** So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech

What seemed to be a random choice to her was actually a divine appointment to land in the field of Boaz. Boaz was a very wealthy man and was “coincidentally” a relative of Naomi’s husband and could therefore “coincidentally” secure an inheritance for Ruth and Naomi.

Already, in the book of Ruth, we see God’s hand invisibly moving to ensure that Ruth’s needs are met.

But He does not provide for everyone in the same way or even with the same level of assurance. In the issue of providing needs, the Biblical principle is that God provides to every one in a general sense, but to others in a specific sense.

That principle is illustrated in the second chapter of Ruth. She has finished her first day’s gleaning and has brought home an abundance of grain.

**Ruth 2: 17 -18** So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley.  
She took it up and went into the city,  
and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned

So Ruth is pleased that she was able to find a place to glean so that she could provide for herself and for her mother in law. But during her day of gleaning, something was happening, of which she was totally unaware.

**Ruth 2: 15 -16** When she rose 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"

Do you see what was happening? As the gleaners lined up behind the reapers, gathering the gleanings, Boaz’s servants were purposely gathering up the choice heads of grain and dropping them directly in front of Ruth.

So there is a definite distinction between Ruth and the other gleaners. The gleaners' needs were met in a general sense and Ruth's needs were met in a special, specific sense.

This distinction in the story is a picture of the difference between God's "common grace" and His "special grace".

God's common grace extends to all of humanity. In his common grace, God provides many blessings for his creation, including food and shelter, sunshine and rain, and food, in a general sense. That is, God provides enough food for the human race, but He does not promise to provide food or provisions for every specific human being.

God's common grace is stated by Jesus:

**Matthew 5:45** He {i.e., God the Father} causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

In the story, the gleaners are the recipients of common grace in that Boaz provided enough grain for everyone to have sufficient food. Ruth, however, received special grace.

God's special grace promises to meet the specific needs of everyone who has trusted in Jesus as his savior. For everyone who, at a specific moment in his life, has recognized that he is a sinner and has understood that Jesus' death on the cross paid the full penalty for all of his sins, God promises to meet all of his physical, tangible needs.

So, in the account given in the book of Ruth, the gleaners are fed in a general sense, but Ruth is singled out for special attention. Ruth received special grace because she had made the one-time decision to trust in the Messiah / Christ Jesus as her savior.

We Christians in America have probably been like Ruth. We are accustomed to going to our supermarkets and retrieving the things we need off the shelf. Like Ruth, we have not been realizing that God has been placing items on the shelves with our names on them.

Sometimes it takes a time of shortages and empty shelves for us to see those items which God has placed in our paths.

If you have trusted in Jesus as your personal savior, when you go to the supermarket and pull your item off of the shelf, you can know with assurance that God placed it there for you!

In regard to God providing our needs, there is one more detail which we need to understand.

It would be of great benefit to us if we grasp the reason that God provides for those of us who are believers. And the reason goes well beyond the obvious.

We begin by knowing that, in the story of Ruth, Boaz is a picture of Jesus and Ruth is a picture of the believer in Jesus (or as our African brothers and sisters sometimes call themselves, “trustees in Jesus”).

If we understand this relationship we will understand the surprising specific reason why God provides our needs.

In the story, Ruth begins by trying to gain Boaz’s favor. Once she sees how he has welcomed her to his field, she realizes with gratitude that she has indeed gained his favor.

**Ruth 2:13** Then she said, "I have found favor in your sight, my lord,  
for you have comforted me."

Now we have to see a progression in Ruth’s understanding of her relationship with Boaz.

At first she tried to receive his favor. Then she recognized that she had his favor. Then she recognized that Boaz was trying to gain her favor!

**Ruth 2:8** Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen carefully. Do not go to glean  
in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one."

Ruth realized that Boaz wanted her to stay in his field, to rest under his protection, to rely on him for her provisions. In other words, Boaz was seeking her favor!

As we remember that Boaz and Ruth represent Jesus and us, we come to a startling conclusion: Jesus is seeking OUR favor!

So often we think that we have to seek God’s favor. We have a hard time grasping the fact that once we trusted in Jesus as our personal Savior, He took our sins and He gave us His righteousness. Therefore, from that moment on, we have just as much favor with God the Father as does Jesus.

As it was with Ruth and Boaz, we have God’s favor. Our favor is never removed, nor does it even diminish.

And, again as with Ruth and Boaz, as surprising as it may sound, God is trying to seek our favor with Him!

That is why He supplies our needs – so that He will have favor with us!

So, why would God seek our favor? We will see the answer in Part 2.

Until then may God richly bless you.

And may He supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

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***“The Gleaners” by Jules Breton***