

Ruth 2

Intro Overwhelmed January 13, 2008

It's 7:30 a.m. and Claire O'Connor is helping her seven-year-old daughter, Blaise, get ready for school — with one eye on her BlackBerry. While the self-employed public relations consultant was asleep last night, she received more than 25 e-mails, and she's anxious to check them.

Before her head hits the pillow tonight, O'Connor will field some 400 e-mails, 100 phone calls and 20 text messages. She takes little comfort in knowing that few of the messages demand urgent attention. That's because she'll sift through them all before determining which are important. Somehow she'll try to find chunks of time to get some actual work done.

"I never really feel like I'm finished for the day," O'Connor says. There's always one more task, one more call, one more e-mail. And no matter where she goes, her BlackBerry is close by.

Always on like most responsible people, O'Connor grew up believing she had to finish her homework before she could go out to play. Now, for her and many of us, the homework never ends. Surveys show that the average office worker sends and receives 108 e-mails a day—an onslaught of electronic clutter that can take hours to slog through. Even when we manage to clear out the in-box and escape our desks, most of us are still reachable by cell phone or some other handheld device. Sure, these gadgets add convenience and fun to our lives, but there's a price to be paid. We are left overwhelmed.

"Technology is allowing us to do things we've never been able to do, and it's positively incredible," says Edward M. Hallowell, MD, author of *CrazyBusy*. "The downsides are that it's addictive and you can become tied to it in ways that are exhausting."

There's little evidence that the rapid pace of technological innovation has made life markedly more enjoyable. In fact, it may be doing the opposite. Consider a 2007 survey by the American Psychological Association (APA), which found that 48 percent of Americans feel their lives have become more stressful in the past five years. Then consider that all our electronic communication hasn't slowed the raging flood of snail mail, memos, books, magazines and other print matter that most people read to keep up on the job. No wonder that more than a third of those surveyed by the APA said a major factor feeding their stress was work encroaching on personal time.¹

Overwhelmed: to be conquered by a superior force, to be destroyed and crushed, to be covered or buried beneath a mass of something. That is what the dictionary tells us what it means to be overwhelmed.

For many of us we don't need it defined. We know what it is; we just want it gone. There are tools to ease the stress of life: take a walk, breath deeply, find a happy place. Perhaps you've been told to just take on one day at a time, but lately, several days have attacked you all at once.

If there is one way to describe the events of Ruth, they are overwhelming.

Besieged by the fear of famine, Elimelech takes his family from Bethlehem to Moab, a land known for false prophets and women of questionable moral character. Doubting God's grace in the Promised Land, they run to a place where they could be free from the fears of life. But while there, Elimelech dies, leaving an overwhelmed widow and two sons, who soon marry two Moabite women.

When the sons die, Naomi is helpless and beset by bitterness. She returns to Bethlehem, with one daughter-in-law in tow, angry with God and hostile toward those around her. When she comes home, she announces her name change — from Naomi to Mara, from pleasant to bitter.

Fortunately, that is not the end of the story. READ Ruth 2 (p222)

Last week we left Ruth and Naomi having just returned from Moab, to Bethlehem, the House of Bread, at the beginning of the barley harvest. So it should not come as a surprise what each person does next.

Ruth, who points Naomi to God's promised faithfulness as the solution for bitterness, decides to go out to the fields to glean. We'll talk about that in a moment, but notice Naomi's response: "Go."

I get the sense Naomi is still quite bitter. In her slough of despond, she concludes God is not good and there is little reason to try to make life better. That she's overwhelmed is an understatement. She has spiraled down into hopelessness and inactivity. She won't even lift a finger to relieve their plight. She is that overwhelmed with bitterness.

Bitterness comes as we are overwhelmed by life, be it a techno flood of info or an onslaught of painful relationships gone sour. Bitterness comes as we recognize that we are not in control... and we aren't too sure we can trust the One who is.

Sound familiar? Perhaps some of you here are in that same pit, so low you have to look up to see bottom. Hold on, the answer to being so overwhelmed is soon to follow.

Ruth, on the other hand, sets out to get some grub. God's Law prescribes how harvesting was done, for in Deuteronomy 24:19-22 the agrarian society was to take care of its poor. (read) If anyone is classified as a potential gleaner, it is Ruth. She is a widow as well as a foreigner.

But for her, she is not overwhelmed by the circumstances of life, but rather appears positively overwhelmed by the potential to experience good. There's confidence (naiveté say the cynical) that someone will show her favor.

What happens next evidences of God's care of the overwhelmed.

With a sense of irony, the author tells us in v3, that Ruth chanced upon chance, it just soooo happened, well what do you know... she found herself on Boaz's fields.

Who is Boaz? We skipped verse 1. Ruth knows nothing about this guy. Naomi does not consider him as a source of help. All we are told at first is that there is a relative of Naomi's husband named Boaz who is a worthy man, a term with a wide range of meaning.

It was used of Gideon when the Angel of the Lord addressed the wimpy warrior as a mighty man of valor. The term is used of warriors and wealthy men, of those who have substantial character, integrity. We are given a hint in v1 of Boaz's moral fiber. We will see it explored further by how he responds to Ruth.

What Ruth does not know is that her life is about to change. Overwhelmed by life's circumstances she is about to be overwhelmed by God's grace in a man named Boaz.

Verse 4 – *Behold* (don't be shocked...God's at work) here comes Boaz out to inspect his fields and we get the first taste of his fine character as he greets his workers. "The Lord be with you!"

Does this sound like your boss? Your boss may use some form of the Lord's name, but not like this. Can you imagine your manager, the CEO of the company entering the office with this kind of salutation and heads pop up out of cubicles, in unison saying, "The Lord bless you" and it is not because of a sneeze.

This is not your ordinary group of field hands. God's grace is at work in the most common of places. If you want to know how to overwhelm those around you, watch what Boaz does.

His character is seen again in v5 as he eyes a worker in his fields who does not belong. You get the sense that he cares about his workers. The question he asks, though, is unlike the way we would ask it: "To whom does she belong"

The question is not one of ownership, but community. She is out of place. He knows that she does not work for him. He probably can see she is a foreigner and he is wondering how she fits into their society. Now as the story unfolds, as he feeds her and provides above and beyond what is expected, you cynics and romantics may have the same response.

Boaz may well be a man of worthy character, but he is still a man...and Ruth, well, she is a woman. There's a fox in his field and he is an eligible bachelor and this is a love story.

But wait; don't forget what we are talking about here. Boaz is a rich, pious Jew. He can have his pick of woman. Ruth, on the other hand is an outsider, from a people cursed by God. She is not a virgin, having been married to Mahlon, Mr. Typhoid and he's dead and she's barren. What is more, she's sweaty, grimy, torn and tattered.

Oh, one more thing as Boaz gets the lowdown on this lowlife, her only family in the area...is her mother-in-law, Betsy Bitterness.

Remember, guys, you marry the girl; you get her mother, too.

His foreman fills Boaz in, but what Boaz hears does not turn him against her, but in her favor.

Bethlehem is a small village. He no doubt heard about Naomi's humiliating return. But in v7 we see Ruth's character...she's a hard worker, having been at it all day.

What Boaz does next and Ruth's response should overwhelm us.

Boaz addresses this *nothing* with tender words: "now, listen, *my daughter*. What is more, while the law commands that workers leave something behind for gleaners to labor and provide for themselves, Boaz goes beyond the Law's requirements. "Stay in my fields, keep close to my people, follow after them.

He'll do even more, but here, we see Boaz's care for Ruth's safety, ensuring there be no sexual harassment of her by the men. Her status afforded little protection, but in God's grace she was directed to the very place where she would be safe.

What is more, she is elevated above her standing in society: *when you are thirsty...*

It is not just that he is offering her some water. In that society foreigners drew water for Jews. If no foreigners, then slaves, if no slaves then...women did the work. But he turns the tables; she is to drink what the men have drawn.

How does she respond? She is overwhelmed.

She adopts the posture of the culture, falling face down on the ground, asking the obvious question, but the very thing she sought to find ... (v2) favor in the eyes of another, especially in light of her status...a foreigner. She uses a term of derision. She is a black in Jim Crow south, a Japanese in 1940's California, a Jew in Nazi Germany.

She is overwhelmed by his favor, by his graciousness shown to her, for she brings no merit to demand such treatment, no credentials that force this response.

Boaz replies as to why he is responding as he is

He's heard what she has done for her mother-in-law, as overwhelmed as she must have been through the tragedies of her life; she has sought to identify herself with God's people.

He then calls for God to repay her, reward her, literally that she be made complete, that God's peace prevails, that she would be made whole. Why? Because of what she has done, certainly in her serving of bitter Naomi, but also, that she has sought refuge in God's grace.

She responds another time, with many of the same ideas, that she's received favor, found grace. What Boaz says comforts her, his words are kind...and she does not deserve such treatment.

Again and again in this chapter and throughout this book the prayers and praise that is on the lips of each character, even what Naomi says, bitter though she is, always focus on the other person. Prayers are for others, that God would comfort and guide them. There is no self-pity found on Ruth's lips and no demand for praise in Boaz's words.

If we are to speak of grace that overwhelms those to whom we speak, we must let our words point to God's grace at work in the other person. Boaz has no problem praising Ruth, what she has done is tremendous, but he does not stop there. He points to the source of her grace filled life. He calls for God's grace to be poured out in the life of one who no one would ever expect to receive God's grace. He treats her as though she is a part of God's people, even though she is a foreigner.

When we treat each other, treat those we view as outsiders with such kindness, we live before them this kind of overwhelming grace that we see in Boaz.

In verse 14 we have the next scene. We move from the fields to the meal. Once again God's overwhelming grace is made very real through the graciousness of Boaz toward this outsider.

He calls her in to eat, but not just table scraps that a gleaner would receive. He calls her to dip her dried bread in the wine. She's invited to a feast, taking her place among the reapers. *He serves her* roasted grain. She eats until she can eat no more and has some left over.

When she goes back to work, he gives her more advantages that should not be afforded to a gleaner. She is permitted to go into the stalks of grain and pull out from the work that the harvesters have done. They are to cut down the sheaves and purposefully leave them behind.

What is more, the guys are to say nothing to her. They are not to shoo her away, they are not to treat her with disdain given her lowly position.

At the end of the day she beats out the grain to separate the grain from the stalks and ends up with ephah of barley...we're not exactly sure how much that is, probably a fifty pound sack, enough to last a couple weeks.

It is then that she goes home to Naomi, who's pulled the covers over her head waiting for life to end. Here we see how grace overwhelms the overwhelmed.

When Ruth walks in, a sack of grain over her shoulder and a smile on her face, Naomi asks the obvious question: where did you go? She then makes the first statement that speak to her renewed faith: "blessed be the man who took notice of you." But notice how Ruth responds. She does answer the question, for her it is not about *where* she worked, but *for whom* she worked.

So Naomi launches into her next praise, now clearly overwhelmed by God's grace (v20). She blesses Boaz, but the next phrase is a bit confused...*whose* kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead? Whose kindness? Boaz or the LORD's? The best antecedent is Yahweh.

Naomi at last sees that God's *hesed*, God's covenant faithfulness, his graciousness, is poured out on her household. But it was done through another person, but not just any person, a close relative, one who is their *go'el*, their redeemer.

We will see what that term means more in the next two weeks. But what must not escape our attention is that this old bitter woman's heart is melting.

Ruth explains what their future looks like, how Boaz sought to protect and provide for her. Naomi sees the benefit in such a plan. And Ruth followed through, not just for the barley harvest, but right through the wheat harvest as well, about seven weeks of gleaning, seven weeks that, if her take each day was similar to this day, she would have enough grain for the whole year.

Naomi's bitterness begins to fade; at last she sees the connection between God's loving-kindness and human compassion. God's work in our lives is most often mediated through God's people.

Naomi had cut herself off from God's people when she, Elimelech and the boys headed out to Moab. Fortunately for her and Ruth, that they returned to the House of Bread where they could be feed real grain so that they would taste the Bread of Life.

So now the question comes to you and me, bitter people we may be. If you are overwhelmed by life, if the heaping up of troubles has made it hard to see the light of God's love for you, if you are burdened by the rat race and the rats are winning...then here we see and hear, taste and touch God's *hesed*. Here we should be overwhelmed by grace.

But you say, I am under-whelmed by what I see and touch here. Understandable problem. So you feel like Naomi. Ruth went out, not with any concrete knowledge or experience to expect compassion, but the knowledge of her God that she now was going to serve. Naomi held back until God put grain in her lap.

How many bags of grain will it take you for you to say that God's kindness has not forsaken you? They had grain for only some days from that first day. What if Boaz, under pressure from the gleaners' union, was forced to stop his grain-sharing program? Sure, God is gracious today, but how can I be sure about tomorrow?

That is often were we live, isn't it? But God would have us be overwhelmed by his grace in the small events in our lives. For Ruth and Naomi, God used Boaz. Who is the Boaz in your life, whom God has used as a pointer to God's grace at work in an overwhelmed person like you?

But, you say, it would be easy for Ruth and Naomi, they had grain poured into their lives. I have bills pouring out of my mailbox and kids running roughshod over my life. Because they had enough food for the day do you think Ruth and Naomi thought all their concerns were answered?

What's the last line of the chapter..."she lived with her mother-in-law."

Her problems were not yet solved. We know where this is going, but Ruth didn't. She still had to trust God's long-range provision. Not just for bread or a husband, but also for her redemption, that has been foreshadowed up to this point. You may be living with your mother in law now, that is, not the final solution, but a stopgap and you wonder if God will forget you tomorrow.

The joy of the gospel is knowing how the story ends. Our redeemer lives and has purchased us not just a loaf of bread, but our very lives are His. What overwhelms us in life is here today and tomorrow, but someday will be gone. What we need today is to be overwhelmed by God's grace that our deepest need has been met in Christ, that his covenant faithfulness overwhelms us with the truth that we are his, for all eternity.

Fix your eyes not on the flood of emails, of the work that never ends or the job that never comes your way. Fix your eyes first on what God has provided for you in Christ and then look and see his daily provision of bread this day. God's great faithfulness never ends.

¹ Adapted from Jan 2008 Reader's Digest <http://www.rd.com/content/dont-be-overwhelmed-by-technology-get-a-grip/1/>