

Logan Smith
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Ruth 2

Finding Favor Under the Lord's Wings

I love a good story - whether it's in a book, on a movie or TV screen, or a play on a stage - I love a story that sucks you in, gets you invested in the characters, and makes you relate to their emotions and experiences. Most of all, I love a story where the problem is solved, the character's situation improves, and there's a happy ending. The book of Ruth is an example of just such a story; it's wonderfully delightful and encouraging, beloved by Christians for good reason. When we began the book of Ruth last week, in chapter 1, I noted that this book tells a sweet, beautiful story of God's kindness, providence, and redemption for His people. After spending a couple of months in the book of Judges, the book of Ruth is a breath of fresh air! In Judges, things keep going wrong, and we even get used to the heroes messing up and sinning in terrible ways. So when we get to Ruth, it's quite refreshing to see everything go right! But as we saw last week, the story begins still back in the dark days of the judges, in the dark days of sin, tragedy, and despair - not just in the land, but in the lives of a particular family, in the lives of our main characters, Naomi and Ruth. If we think of this story, the book of Ruth, as a drama, or a play, then chapter 1 was Act 1, or episode 1 (for those of you more familiar with TV dramas than plays). In Act 1, or episode 1, we were introduced to two of the main characters - Naomi and Ruth - and the *problem*, or crisis, that needs to be resolved through the rest of the plot: Naomi's husband and both her sons died, leaving her widowed, poor, and vulnerable in a foreign, pagan land. Ruth, her remarkably kind and faithful daughter-in-law, lost her husband, left her family, homeland, gods, and previous life behind, and has followed Naomi into a foreign land, among a foreign people, and has now cast in her entire lot with Naomi and her people, Israel - and that means, Ruth is casting in her lot with Israel's God, Yahweh, transferring her allegiance to Him, her identity with God's people.

But there's a bit of a dramatic irony, some tension on that point: at the end of Act 1, we find Naomi *bitter and angry* with this God, blaming Him for all that has gone wrong! Yet she recognizes that God is still in control; she even asked God to bless Ruth, to show her kindness, just as she has shown kindness to Naomi. And so, that act of the play, or episode 1 if you will, closed on a bit of a cliffhanger: we're left asking, "What's gonna happen to Ruth and Naomi? Is Naomi going to stay bitter and empty, or will she be pleasant and full and joyful again? How will

Ruth, a Moabite, be received in Israel? Will they be cared for, will they find food and favor? Will God protect and provide for them, or will He abandon them?" That's the cliffhanger we were left with as the curtains drew closed.

And I think that's a cliffhanger we can all find relatable for our own lives, isn't it? We often find ourselves living in that kind of tension, in that kind of cliffhanger. Life is often unpredictable, confusing, difficult and frustrating. The unexpected happens. We lose our job, the economy shuts down, we enter a recession - and we're left wondering how - or even *if* - our financial and material needs, the needs of our family, will be met. We get an unwanted report from the doctor, throwing our lives and schedules up in the air. We suffer injustice, oppression, harassment, persecution - maybe even for doing the right thing! And we're left scratching our heads, wondering - "Where is God in all of this?"

Ruth 2 picks up the story with the second act - episode 2 - and the cliffhanger we were left with is starting to be resolved: what we see here is God's remarkable kindness, favor, and provision for Ruth and Naomi! But while the narrator makes that clear here to us as readers, we're also invited to come and experience it from the human perspective of the characters. This story shows us the remarkable providence of God - the fact that the God who made the universe is still very much in control, still very much involved in the goings-on of that universe - yet God's providence is *behind the scenes*, so to speak; God is at work here, providentially working things out for Ruth and Naomi - but He's doing this *through* the means of their circumstances. So from Ruth and Naomi's perspective, they don't know what God's going to do as this story unfolds; from their perspective, the deck seems stacked against them! And that's relatable to us, isn't it? We don't know what tomorrow holds; we don't know what God is doing behind the scenes in our lives, or why certain things happen. But what this chapter reminds us is that even though we don't know the details of what God is doing behind the scenes or why, we can *still trust in the providence of God in our lives!* This chapter encourages us by pulling back the curtain, so to speak - of inviting us into the human experience, but also cutting to God's perspective, to see what God is doing behind the scenes here - in order to show us the *incredible kindness and graciousness of God, providentially at work in the world for His people!*

So this sermon will be a little different than normal. First off, I just want to take some time to walk through this story together, so that we understand what's going on and see how God is at work here. And then, I just have a few points of application for us to draw from this story

for our lives as Christians today. So let's start with understanding the story, which we can summarize like this:

God provides for Ruth and Naomi through the kindness of Boaz (Ruth 2:1-23)

The lights dim, the curtains open - Act 2 of our story begins; the scene is set in Bethlehem, right at the time of the beginning of the barley harvest - the time when the farmers go out into the fields to harvest their barley crop and food with it. It's good news if you're hungry! BUt only if you're a farmer, or have money to spend. As the scene begins, the narrator tells us, in v.1, "Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz." Now this word "worthy" can mean a few different things; it often means wealthy and powerful, or having a good social standing; it can also mean that someone has a "worthy" or noble, upright moral character. Either meaning would work here - in fact, the narrator might intend both to describe Boaz. But Boaz doesn't enter the scene yet, he doesn't walk on the stage or appear on the screen. We're just given a bit of foreshadowing here, raising our hopes and expectations. But the scene opens to Ruth and Naomi, possibly sitting inside their lodgings. They aren't aware of Boaz, or any family members willing to help - instead, they seem sober, aware of their desperate and vulnerable position. Remember where we left Naomi? She's become bitter and angry. But now Ruth takes center stage - and she takes initiative. She doesn't wallow in self-pity, she doesn't sit around on her hands. She says, in v.2, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor."

First we have to ask, what does she mean by going to "glean"? Well this is different than the normal harvesting that farmers would do. Gleaning was something that was specifically set up and allowed for under the Mosaic Law of Israel, in places like Lev. 19; 23; or Deut. 24. The entire purpose was to care and provide for the vulnerable, destitute, and marginalized populations of the society: widows, orphans, and foreign sojourners. These would be individuals who were poor and vulnerable, who weren't able to work and provide for themselves like normal. God commanded Israel to not harvest every single bit of their crops, but to instead leave a bit - around the corners and edges, or even ears of grain that they happen to drop - to leave a bit behind for the widows, orphans, and poor sojourners to come and gather, in order to have some food to eat. So Ruth is going out to glean. She's aware of how desperate and vulnerable they are. But this is also significant because Ruth comes from Moab - she grew up a foreign pagan, outside Israel.

The fact that she knows about God's command to let the poor glean during harvest shows that she's aware of God's Word - *and* that she's acting in faith upon it, casting herself on the mercy of God's Word. It reminds us of Ruth's conversion that we witnessed in the last chapter - that Ruth has left her pagan people and gods behind to be part of Israel and worship the true God, now.

But secondly, we have to ask, "Why does Ruth mention that she'll look for someone with whom she can find favor?" I think the answer is because, even though God's Law command Israel to let the poor glean, this doesn't mean that everyone in Israel necessarily followed this command. After all, we're in the days of the Judges, where everyone sinned and did evil all the time! There were some serious risks involved here. The field owner and workmen might get angry with Ruth and kick her out for being a Moabite; they might be greedy and not allow anyone to glean in their fields; she even runs the risk of being assaulted and taken advantage of, as an attractive young, single woman going out into a field among workmen. Ruth needs to find favor.

The story continues, v.3: "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.*" Now we need to pause and notice how this story is being told for a second: the author's saying, Ruth *just so happened* to stumble into the field belonging to Boaz, their relative, who we've already been told is a "worthy man." But he's being intentionally sarcastic here; we know coincidences don't just happen! The Bible doesn't have a category for luck - things aren't lucky; things are *providential*. Fortunate coincidences are nothing less than the hand of God. One commentator put it this way: "By excessively attributing Ruth's good fortune to chance, he forces the reader to sit up and take notice, to ask questions concerning the significance of everything that is transpiring. The statement is ironical; it's purpose is to undermine purely rational explanations for human experiences and to refine the reader's understanding of providence. In reality, he [the author/narrator] is screaming, 'See the hand of God at work here!'"¹

And the kind providence of God at work here becomes very clear and easy to see. As Ruth is gleaning, "behold, Boaz" came out into the field from town. He and his workers greet each other in the name of the Lord; he asks about Ruth, finding out that she's the Moabite foreigner that came back with Naomi. And then, to our great relief: Boaz shows incredible kindness and care to Ruth! He gives her *protection*, commanding his workers not to "touch" her

¹ Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, TNAC, p.653.

(v.9) - that is, not to harm or harass her, not to touch her inappropriately. He also *provides* for Ruth. He tells her to glean with her young women in the fields, and to drink water that his servants draw. Clearly, she's found favor with this man! She's overwhelmed by his kindness, in v.10, asking, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" What Boaz is doing here is remarkable. She's poor and needy, she's a foreigner, a Moabite, from the pagan enemies of God! Why does he show her kindness and favor? He answers in vv.11-12: It's because he's heard of her kindness to Naomi, and even more significantly: he recognizes that Ruth has "come to take refuge" under "the wings" of the Lord, saying, "a full reward being given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" Boaz recognizes that Ruth is not just a sojourner - she's converted, she's seeking refuge, provision, and mercy from the Lord. And he recognizes that God is indeed showing her favor and blessing, that God is granting her refuge - even through Boaz's own kindness and favor! In beautiful language, he pictures the Lord as a mother bird, fluttering her wings over her baby chicks to keep them safe. And that's exactly what God is doing here with Ruth! Boaz's kindness is but a glimpse of the Lord's kindness!

In vv.14-16, he even goes above and beyond the normal laws about gleaning: he invites her to eat food with them - no small thing, since she's a Moabite and they are Jews! - showing that he recognizes Ruth as a convert to Israel, just like his mom, Rahab. Then, he tells his workmen to let Ruth glean from among all the crops, and to even leave out good shafts of grain for her, not just the scraps.

At the end of the day, in vv.17-23, Ruth comes home from her day's work with an enormous amount of food to show for it! She comes back to Naomi with a whole ephah of barley - about 30-50 pounds worth! Not only is this a comically large amount of food for her to carry, but this would have been over a week's worth of food for the two of them!² God has certainly provided! And Naomi knows it. She's astounding, asking who showed Ruth such favor - it's clear that this isn't normal! But even more importantly, Naomi recognizes that this is *the blessing and provision of God!* IN v. 20, she praised and blessed the name of "the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Clearly, this is a major shift from the Naomi we left last week, who bitterly complained of being empty and angrily blamed God. Here she shows that she indeed still has faith in God - she recognizes his provision and praises Him for it! She praises

² K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges, Ruth*, p.563.

God for showing them *kindness* - the Hebrew word *Hesed*, capturing all the ideas of God's lovingkindness, steadfast love, loyalty, compassion, covenant faithfulness. And she recognizes God's kindness and provision came to them through Boaz's kindness and generosity. The two aren't exclusive - God works through *means*. She praises God for Boaz's provision; and also his *protection* of Ruth, noting in v.21 that it would be dangerous for Ruth in other fields, where she might be assaulted and taken advantage of. And finally, Naomi praises God for the fact that Boaz is a relative - and not just that, a *kinsman redeemer*. Here we see more foreshadowing - there's more to the story here between Ruth and Boaz; as we're going to see in the next two chapters, Boaz can bring even greater blessing by redeeming their family and marrying Ruth - but that's a story for next time. This act of the play, episode two, ends here on this happy, joyous note; the screen fades to black on the happy ending of these two women continuing to pile food onto their once empty table, day after day as Ruth continues to glean, blessing and praising God for his kind providence.

So, how does this sweet story apply to us today? First off, it teaches us that...

I. We Can Trust in God's Kind Providence for His People

This isn't just a story about how God's providence was at work in the lives of Ruth and Naomi - it's a story about how God's providence is at work in the lives of *all of his people*, all the time, in all things. Nothing "just happens." Ruth "just happened" upon Boaz's field - and we know the point: this wasn't a coincidence, it was the gracious hand of GOD at work. And so it is true for us: nothing in our lives *just happens*. There are no coincidences. Like Ruth and Naomi, we all walk around in this world unable to see the future, unable to understand why things happen the way they do, unable to see the answers to our problems. And yet, this story reminds us that we don't have to wonder where God is, or wonder whether or not He hears us, sees us, or cares - it reminds us that God *is at work* behind the scenes of our lives, whether we can see it or not. This passage is an encouragement for us to trust in the kind providence of God.

As we talked about last week, God is *completely sovereign* over all things. That means, God is in control over all! He is the Creator of all things; He's also the *sustainer* of all things! God isn't some great clock-maker; the universe isn't some just giant, cosmic clock that God made, hung on the wall, and walked away from, letting it tick away on it's own. No, God is personally involved in this world, in all the events of history - even in all the details of our lives! As Eph. 1:11 tells us, God "works all things according to the counsel of His will." Every detail of

our lives is part of the providence of God! And this is a good thing because God is good and kind, and He promises to be at work in all things, in every detail of our lives, for the *good of His people*. As Rom. 8:28 says, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” As Christians, we can trust and know with certainty that God is at work in our lives, working behind the scenes *for our good*, even when we can’t see how or why. God is doing what’s *best for us*. And keep in mind: that means *what is actually* best for us, not what *we think* is best. And that means we can *trust* Him, that we can trust in and look for the providence of God in our lives. We can trust the Lord to care for and provide for us, His people.

Remember when we went through the Sermon on the Mount, in the book of Matthew? In Matt. 6:31-33, Jesus says, “Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” No, God doesn’t promise that we’ll all be rich and have everything we want. But He *does promise* that if we follow after Him, He’ll care for us and provide for all our needs. So maybe you’re struggling financially; maybe things seem to be falling apart around you. Keep trusting the Lord and following Him; trust that He is at work in all these things for your God, that He will provide for you and your family.

Furthermore, we can trust that God is at work for our *spiritual good*. He is at work to sanctify and mature us, to preserve and strengthen our faith, to glorify His name in our lives. Most of all, we can trust God’s providence because God has worked to *save us from our sin*, working out our own salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord! If God has done the greatest thing, even saving you personally from your sins and the wrath you deserve, then how can we not trust Him in all the lesser things in our lives?

So we can trust in the providence of God. But how, then, should we live in light of this?

II. We Should Trust and Obey in Light of God’s Kind Providence

Trusting in the providence of God isn’t an excuse for us to be passive, to sit around on our hands - it motivates us to action, to have an active faith! And Ruth is an excellent example of that for us. At the beginning of this chapter, she doesn’t know what God’s going to do. She doesn’t know where their food will come from, if she will find favor, provision, or protection - she just doesn’t know. In fact, all the odds seem against her! But she decides to cast herself upon

the mercy of God; she turns the Yahweh, the God of ISrael, under whose wings she seeks refuge! And so she sets out and takes action *as an act of faith*. Trusting in the Lord doesn't mean that we don't act or work - on the contrary, it means we act and work *because* we're trusting in the Lord! When the going gets rough and the skies turn gray, when trials and suffering comes into our life, we might be tempted to be paralyzed by confusion, fear, or depression. But when you trust in the providence of God, when you trust that God is at work in your life, then this gives you incredible encouragement to get up and act! We can trust the Lord and obey Him, just taking the next step in being faithful, trusting that the Lord will work. We lose our job, things get tight financially - what do you do? You cry out to the Lord in prayer; and then, you keep walking forward in faith - you look for a job, you seek to be wise with your finances, you keep being generous and tithing, providing for your family - and trust that the Lord will indeed provide for your needs in His perfect timing! Sorrow and suffering comes our way, but we can keep walking forward by trusting that the Lord is at work for our good. Therefore, let us put our trust in God's providence into action. Let us trust the Lord and obey.

And as we do so, we should also seek to be instruments of God's kind providence to others. Leading us to our this point of application...

III. We Should Show Kindness to Others Just as God Shows Kindness to Us

This passage has shown us that God works and provides *through means* - even through the actions of other people, like Boaz. God's kindness, provision, and protection is shown to Ruth *through* Boaz's kindness, provision, and protection. Boaz is a good, noble, and worthy man here - but we know this doesn't come from Boaz himself; this comes from the Lord! Boaz is being used as an instrument of the Lord's grace. And at the exact same time, Boaz is held up for us as a model, an example, for how we should respond to God's kindness - just like Ruth was. As we experience God's kind providence in our lives, it should move our hearts to want to show the same kindness to others. We love others because we have been loved by God first; we should show loving kindness, grace, generosity, and faithfulness to others because this is exactly what God has shown, and continues to show, to us! And this is exactly what the gospel teaches us, isn't it? We are saved by grace, not good works; but we are saved *for* good works! As we experience the grace of God in Christ, it transforms our hearts, changing us to show to others the same grace and love we've received!

So it is fitting that we imitate the kindness of Boaz in order to imitate the kindness of God. Let us show kindness and generosity to the poor, the destitute, the homeless, the vulnerable, because when we were poor and helpless in our sin, God lavished the riches of his grace upon us in Christ Jesus! Let us show kindness, compassion, and hospitality to the marginalized, the foreigner, the immigrant, the minority, those different than us, those of a different social class than us, because God has brought us near when we were His enemies! We were sojourners and aliens, and God has brought us near and made us citizens of the kingdom of God! Let us show kindness, generosity, compassion, and faithfulness to the orphan, for God has adopted us into His family as His own children, that we might call Him father! To the widow, to the single mother, to the one abandoned by their spouse, for Christ is our husband and even gave up His life for us! Let us be kind and gracious to one another, for we are brothers and sisters, part of the people of God! We should overflow with loving kindness because God never ceases to pour out loving kindness on us, even saving our souls from Hell through the gospel of Christ!

And the kindest thing we can do to anyone is to share the gospel: to tell them the incredible good news that they, too, can find favor with God and experience His kindness; that they too can find refuge under the wings of the Lord! This should drive us to have an evangelistic zeal, to share the gospel with everyone that we can, no matter who they are or how far off from God they may seem. We should be eager to share the gospel with all because we truly believe that *anyone* can find favor and refuge with in Christ. Which leads us to our final point...

IV. All Who Seek Refuge in Christ Find Favor with God

The beauty of this story is wrapped up in the beautiful imagery of v.12, where Boaz tells Ruth that she has favor with him, because she has favor with “the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” Remember how we saw last week that Moabites weren’t even allowed into the assembly of God? Ruth, a poor, widowed sojourner; a Moabite, a former idol-worshiping pagan, an enemy of God’s people - *she*, of all people, has found favor with God! Why? Because she turned to the Lord in faith; because she cast herself upon the Lord’s mercy and sought refuge in Him! She has found refuge under God’s wings!

And here’s the point: the God of Ruth is the same God who offers grace and refuge to us today! And here’s the glorious news: centuries later, one of Ruth’s descendants would be born - Jesus Christ, the God-Man, who lived a perfect life, died on the cross to pay the penalty for our

sins, satisfying the wrath of God that we all deserve, and rose again on the third day! And God accepted this sacrifice! The good news is that *anyone* who turns to Christ in faith - no matter your social class, your ethnic background, no matter how much money you make, your job, education, no matter how good you are, no matter how bad and wicked and sinful you've been - if you seek refuge under the wings of Christ, trusting Him as your redeemer, then you will have favor with God in the name of Christ!

If you're trusting in Christ alone this morning, then rest assured: you have favor with God! You have refuge under his wings! You can trust in God's providence in your life because God has redeemed your soul from sin and saved you from the Hell you deserve! Let us praise the Lord and rejoice in Him! And one special way we get to do this is by coming to the Lord's Table, where we proclaim that we are trusting in this gospel of Christ, seeking refuge from our sins in Christ alone. If you're a baptized believer in the gospel of Christ this morning, then I invite you to come to the table with us in a moment.

But if not, then the way you can respond this morning is by putting seeking refuge under the Lord's wings for the first time; place your faith in Christ, believe that He lived, died, on the cross, and was raised *for your sins*; repent and believe in Him, and you will have favor with God by grace through faith in Christ alone! Then, make your faith public through baptism. If you have any questions, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.