

God's Grace and Providence in Little Things and Little Towns Like Bethlehem (Ruth 2)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton on Christmas Sunday, December 20, 2009

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On Sunday evenings we have been studying through the book of Ruth, which has been one of the most moving and impactful series of messages to me personally that I've ever preached, and since I won't be here *this evening* because of a wedding, I want to give the next message in that verse-by-verse series this morning, which in God's providence happens to fit nicely with the cantata theme "After darkness, light." A little over 3,000 years ago, this story tells us about a Jewish couple, Elimelech and Naomi, who moved away from Israel in the dark times of the Judges, when everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The times were even darker for Naomi in Moab: her husband died, their 2 sons had married pagan idol-worshipping Moabite women, and for perhaps 10 years neither marriage produced a grandson to carry on the family name. And to add darkness upon darkness, both of Naomi's sons died ...

But in Ruth 1:6, Naomi is in the fields of Moab and "just happens" to hear from someone who had travelled from Israel that the Lord had visited his people again and blessed them by providing them food. A little glimmer of light is now seen on the horizon of a darkening sky in the twilight of this widow's life, the dark clouds move and reveal a star shining and she follows this light from the East in Moab back to the town of Bethlehem. And along the way, another light shines on the path: Ruth, widowed daughter-in-law, has come to worship the Lord of Israel and v. 16 expresses Ruth's conversion from darkness to light, from idols to Naomi's true God.

²² *So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*

In Jewish calendar and culture, the beginning of barley harvest was the springtime season kicked off by the Passover Meal (14th of Nissan celebrating their redemption from Egypt under Moses) and then followed over the next 7 days by the Feast of Unleavened Bread and then First-fruits (the first grain of which was barley). Leviticus 23 describes how Israel's priests were to take the first sheaf gathered and wave it before the Lord, signifying the Lord was the provider of our daily bread and grain and all things, and also indicating faith in God's providence (providing and guiding and governing involvement of God) that there was more to come.

This is the very exact historical time that God's providence, not coincidence, brings Naomi and Ruth into town, and it would prove to be a time of great significance in redemptive history, not only in the past redemption of Israel as a nation under their deliverer Moses, but in this story it will be the time of redemption for a non-Israelite individual gal named Ruth under another redeemer, and in the future it would be a time where the ultimate Redeemer and Deliverer would redeem and deliver all God's children eternally.

Jesus Christ is called in the NT "Lord of the harvest" and Passover and Passover Lamb. It was with unleavened bread Jesus spoke of His death at the Last Supper, and Paul calls His resurrection the first-fruits (1 Cor. 15:20-22). It was not by mere happenstance or chance that Jesus fulfilled the OT on this week, dying on Passover Friday, and rising on the 16th day of Nissan, the day after the Sabbath that the OT calls the Feast of First Fruits.

Just as the first fruits of barley was an OT promise of a harvest to come, so also Christ's resurrection signifies to all believers of more to come in the future – all who trust Christ will be raised with Him in the end. Later readers of the Bible can see God's orchestrating all these little details leading to Christ. Coincidence? No. Providence? Yes!

What is God's Providence? *'God's providence is His almighty and ever present power,[1] whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures,[2] and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty,[3] indeed, all things, come not by chance[4] but by His fatherly hand.[5]*

[1] Jer. 23:23, 24; Acts 17:24-28. [2] Heb. 1:3. [3] Jer. 5:24; Acts 14:15-17; John 9:3; Prov. 22:2. [4] Prov. 16:33. [5] Matt. 10:29.' (source: Heidelberg Catechism, Question #27)

That's really the theological and practical context for our study in Ruth 2, "God's Grace and Providence in Little Things and Little Towns Like Bethlehem." It's in the little things of everyday life that God is working, not just in the rare miracles in biblical history, but in the moment-by-moment step-by-step day-by-day events of life, in dark times of suffering and loss and in the mundane daily routine of work, as we'll see.

2:1 *Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.*

Chapter 1 was written mostly from the human perspective of Naomi, which has been mostly darkness ... but now the narrator shines a light on the perspective of God and His providence. For now the potential provision is totally unknown to Ruth and seems to have been forgotten to Naomi as well, who 2 verses earlier said she had nothing (1:21a), i.e., she thought she was empty of family. Naomi was bankrupt, emotionally and financially, but behind the curtain of this drama the audience gets a peak of a *kinsman* ...

There's a close relative of Naomi's late husband Elimelech, a man of strength and noble character and kindness named Boaz. And oh, yeah, he happens to be rich, and oh, yes, he's single, too. Ruth knows nothing of this, but the readers get this split-screen. We usually can't see what God's doing behind the scenes, but He is the God behind the seen. His invisible hand of providence has its fingerprints in every verse of the book of Ruth and in our lives, too

²*And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter."* 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.*

God provided for the poor in OT law by giving them opportunity to *work* in the fields to gather what was dropped by the harvesters as they made their rounds. In business today, cutting corners isn't usually viewed positively, but in the fields of Israel God called on God's people to leave the corners to the poor, widows, foreigners.

It was more of a “work-fare” system than a welfare system, and it was a God-ordained opportunity for landowners to be gracious and trust God by leaving some of their fortune to the less fortunate, and it was an opportunity for the poor (not a handout or entitlement mentality) to work hard to provide food for them and their family.

It wasn't more spiritual for Ruth to pray “give us this day our daily bread” and then do nothing. She did what she could in faith but she knew her need to receive grace from God and others as she went. It was hard work in the hot sun all day trying to get a handful of food, but maybe she might find mercy from someone who would drop enough scraps of food behind that Ruth so greatly needed.

In Matthew 15, a Gentile woman came before our Redeemer, and *began to cry out, saying, “Have mercy on me, Lord...”* ... *she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!”* And He answered and said, *“It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”* [unclean Gentiles] *But she said, “Yes, Lord; but **even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.**”* Then Jesus said to her, *“O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.”* (v. 22-28)

See if you don't detect a similar attitude in this Gentile woman as we keep reading. v. 2 calls Ruth *“the Moabitess,”* reminding us she was a foreigner as well as poor, and a woman, and a widow at that (3 strikes). Some Jewish men thanked God daily they were not a Gentile or a woman, and Ruth was both, but even worse she was of the esp. hated Moabites. So you can understand why the end of v. 2 has her hope that she might find favor / grace in someone's eyes.

Ruth 2:3 is written with drama and a theological smile: ... *and she **happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz** ...*

The Hebrew root behind “happen” appears 2x in v. 3, as a play on words, like *“it happened that she happened upon a field of Boaz.”* Or *“Ruth turned into a field, and as it turned out, the field was owned by Boaz.”* A couple versions use the phrase “it just so happened” (NCV, ICB), and from a human perspective, Ruth was simply seeking to be a hard-worker and provide for herself and her mother-in-law. But from God's perspective, this was not *“as luck would have it,”* it was as God's *love* would have it. And in v. 20 even Naomi's eyes that were previously blinded in dark suffering are able to see the Lord's kindness behind the events of this chap.

We also see this perspective behind the expressions of v. 4: *Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, “**May the LORD be with you.**”* And they said to him, *“**May the LORD bless you.**”*⁵ Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, *“Whose young woman is this?”*

The word “behold” in v. 4 draws attention, and in the book of Ruth is used for the dramatic effect on the audience of what the actor may not see, but what God's providence is orchestrating and directing behind the scene (ex: Ruth 3:8, 4:1). It was no “accident” that Boaz had come out from Bethlehem at the same time Ruth was gleaning in his fields near town; it was an appointment by God.

Luke 2 (NKJV) ⁸ *Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.* ⁹ *And **behold**, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.*

“Behold” often draws attention to a work of the Lord and in Boaz’s greeting to his workers and their response there is a recognition that it’s only by the Lord’s presence and blessing any of us succeed. Behold (look) to God’s work in this story and in yours ...

Ruth 2 continues ... ⁶ *The servant in charge of the reapers replied, “She is the young **Moabite** woman who returned with Naomi from the land of **Moab**.”* ⁷ *“And she said, ‘Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.’ Thus she came and has remained from the morning until now; she has been sitting in the house for a little while.”* ⁸ *Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen carefully, **my daughter**. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids.”* ⁹ *“Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, **I have commanded the servants not to touch you**. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw.”*

There are any things about the character of both Ruth and Boaz that we could study, and will Lord-willing on a future Sunday evening, but for this study today I want you to notice the *gracious* words of Boaz (and to think beyond him of the Lord he loved and was like). In Luke 4:22 it says people from the hometown of Jesus marvelled at the gracious words coming out of the mouth of Jesus:

- **Personal grace**: “My daughter” (v. 8) is a term of tender-hearted kindness, not the usual way a Jewish man would address a Gentile woman stranger, but a personal term, treating her even like family!

- **Providing grace** (v. 8b “Do not go to glean in another field”) – in other words, your needs will be provided here in these fields

- **Protective grace** (v. 8c “... stay here with my maids”) – and he in v. 9 has already commanded the male workers not to bother or harass her or worse; his authority would guarantee her security

- **Particular grace** (v. 9b “When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw”) – even permission to drink at the same place as Jews was unusual grace (John 4:9) and if she was further granted to draw his water *like a servant* would have been above-and-beyond grace. More likely would be for her to draw water for his workers and maybe their animals and fill the jars and when they have drunk then grace might let her have some as well, but Boaz tells her: *go drink straight from the jars that the men have drawn whenever thirsty, unlimited access like a daughter*

This type of grace comes from Christ ultimately, and a heart changed by His grace that is able to be Christ-like. Our Lord’s grace is *personal* – speaking to us individually, as His child. It’s a grace that *provides* all our needs, according to His riches. It’s grace that *protects*, no one can snatch us out of His hand or care, and it’s *particular*, special, satisfying, unlimited, truly extraordinary grace.

John 7:37 (NASB95) *Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink”*[next verse equates this with trusting Him]

Ruth didn't know Jesus by name, or Boaz yet, but she knows grace and the proper response:
¹⁰*Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, "Why have I found favor [or "grace"] in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?"*

There's a play on words here, like "you have noticed one who is not to be noticed," i.e., he's gone outside culture to aid an outsider. Our Redeemer Jesus also took notice of those his culture shunned. He showed favor and grace to outsiders, children, sinners who had Ruth's same faith and amazement at grace. In Luke 8:47, a *woman saw that she had not escaped notice, she came trembling and fell down before Him [Jesus], and declared in the presence of all the people the reason why ...*⁴⁸ *And He said to her, "Daughter [note the same expression of endearment], your faith has made you well [literally, "has saved you / delivered you"]; go in peace."*

Last week our sermon ended in James 4:6 which says *God gives a greater grace ... but gives grace to the humble*. If you don't have this humble heart, you don't get this grace, God's Word says. If you think you are greater than this, you don't get greater grace.

In Luke 7, another Gentile sent word to Jesus, "*Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy [ESV "to presume"] to come to You. But say the word ...*" (v. 6-7, NKJV)

In Luke 17:16 a Samaritan, another non-Jewish outsider before Jesus "*fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him.*" In each case the Redeemer then commends each for humble faith, and that's what the human Redeemer Boaz now does to Ruth:

Ruth 2:11 "*All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know.*¹² *"May the LORD reward your work [he doesn't know the Lord would later use him to answer this prayer!], and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge."*

"Refuge/wings" is OT terms for saving faith in the Lord, the Lord who in the NT calls us to love Him more than father or mother and even our own people and own self, to be willing to forsake all to follow Him as Lord. No turning back, no looking back, no holding back, and in return the Lord won't hold back full blessing and grace to any humbly come to seek refuge in Him and Him alone. The Lord is ultimately behind this human kindness (v. 12 & 20).

¹³*Then she said, "I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly [lit. to the heart] to your maidservant, though I am not like [some have "not equal to the lowest"] of your maidservants."*¹⁴ *At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar." So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her [talk about counter-cultural kindness to Moabites!] roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left.*

Sounds kind of like our Lord who came that empty people (1:21) might have life and might have it to the full spiritually, abundantly. It's just like Him to make something out of nothing and to have baskets leftover after lunch, like Jesus did with bread loaves on one occasion.

This is just like the Lord we will see in the NT who calls us to come and eat with Him, He's the Bread of Life, who gives us a seat at His table, and even more amazingly, HE serves us!!! It's just like the Lord who Ruth and Boaz can't see physically but who spiritually behind the scenes is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, far beyond all that we ask – or even think – to God be the glory!!!!

¹⁵When she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. ¹⁶“Also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her.” ¹⁷So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley.

Ruth's “cup runneth over” – her barley sack overfloweth. An ephah is estimated by most as at least 30 pounds of barley, maybe more!

¹⁸She took it up and went into the city, and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also took it out and gave Naomi what she had left after she was satisfied [her lunch leftovers].

¹⁹Her mother-in-law then said to her, “Where did you glean today and where did you work? May he who took notice of you be blessed.” So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, “The name of the man with whom I worked today is [... dramatic drumroll ...] Boaz.”

²⁰Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be blessed of the LORD who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead.” Again Naomi said to her, “The man **is our relative, he is one of our closest relatives ...**” [or it can actually be translated “redeemer / kinsman-redeemer”]

We'll learn more about the kinsman and redeemer laws in Israel in a future study, but for now you just need to know that Naomi is liable any moment to break out in the Jewish song “matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match!” Boaz is a man who in the law of God could possibly redeem (buy back) both of them and could even marry Ruth if he desired to keep the family name alive. Things have gone from darkness to light in less than 24 hours!

And these little events in this little book in this little town of Bethlehem would have massive implications toward the biggest event in human history, leading to the birth of Light of the world. The birth of Jesus was announced on a very dark night very close to this very spot by angels, *light after darkness* for hundreds of years, a light that still shines brightly to our dark world today of the glorious gospel, which begins on the first page of the NT with:

Matt 1:5 *Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab [his mom was the converted Gentile harlot!], Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David the king ...*[that's right, not only did Boaz marry Ruth but she was able to have a son this time who was the grandpa of David who grew up and tended flocks in these very same Bethlehem fields!]

Are all these events coincidence? No. Providence? Yes! Ruth may have just wanted to get some barley, but God wanted her to have a boy who would beget the greatest king in Israel's history. Ruth saw only a rugged field she came upon seemingly by chance -- God saw a romance He planned long before God created fields, before the foundation of the world! Ruth was just praying she might find a handful of grain that day, God answers with a handsome groom!

I like how C. H. Spurgeon put it: ‘Little did she know that amid the sheaves she would find a husband, that he should make her the joint owner of all those broad acres, and that she a poor foreigner should become one of the progenitors of the great Messiah. God is very good to those who trust in Him, and often surprises them with unlooked-for blessings. Little do we know what may happen to us tomorrow, but this sweet fact may cheer us ... Chance is banished from the faith of Christians, for they see the hand of God in everything.’—(*Morning and Evening* [highly recommended classic daily devotional book], Oct. 25 PM)

Coincidence? No. Providence? Yes!

It was no mere chance events when Miriam and her mom put baby Moses in a basket in the Nile river that the winds blew the floating fellow over to a place where Pharaoh’s daughter just happened to be taking a bath and it just happened that she was one daughter in Egyptian history with non-traditional aspirations who would adopt and raise that future redeemer and deliverer of Israel. It’s not just “neat how it worked out” that the human redeemer of Israel from slavery in Egypt happens to be kind of like the ultimate Redeemer who delivers us from slavery to sin and who we celebrate this Christmas and who also had an unusual bed as a baby boy!

God is in charge and He has His way of getting His plan done even when seemingly free sinful choices of seemingly free sinful men or women go against God’s Word. So if Jonah is in a boat on the way to Tarshish when God wanted him to go to Nineveh instead, God has His ways of getting him back (even if it involves a storm and a very large fish at just the right time and place, if necessary)!

If a pagan prostitute named Rahab is living in Jericho but God’s sovereign grace wants to rescue her before the walls come tumbling down and everyone else in the city dies, God has His ways of making sure a couple spies will “just so happen” to show up at just her place at just the right time so that she will experience the grace of the Lord and convert to faith in the true God, and so that she will join the Israelite community and marry a Jew and then give birth to a son, who oh by the way, “just so happened” to be named Boaz, the guy we read about in Ruth chapter 2!

And if God has chosen another Gentile pagan woman in a faraway land to marry Rahab’s son, an idol-worshipping young lady named Ruth way over in Moab far away from the promised land, God has his ways of getting her to Bethlehem through Elimelech’s family that moved there through one of Elimelech’s sons finding Ruth attractive (even if his motive was nothing more than that, God had another motive, and though Mahlon dies, God’s plan doesn’t)! Is all that good luck, fate or fortune, chance or happenstance, yin and yang, accidents or coincidence? No! Is it God’s Providence? Yes!

And if God wants this Moabitess Ruth and her mother-in-law to show up in Bethlehem at just the right time, at the right season, and for her to be in the right field at the right time with just the right circumstances, so that she will meet just the right guy because God wants both of their names to be on the first page of the NT along with Rahab, ... well, then God has His ways of doing that, too!

And if God 1,000+ years later wants to get another young woman to Bethlehem just at the right time, even though she's so pregnant she's about to pop and in fact she's already having contractions on the way and might not have made it if their arrival into town had been a few hours later, and would never have made such a long journey at full term if it weren't for a census declared by the free-will of a pagan Caesar requiring everyone to go to where they were born ... well, God has His ways of getting that done as well!!

And if God wants to get some Magi (astrologers / astronomers) from hundreds of miles away in the East to Bethlehem by a sign in the stars and perhaps by some Hebrew Scriptures that were left there hundreds of years earlier by the Israelites in captivity, and one of the wise men just happens to have the scroll and know how to read Hebrew and puts the prophecies together and if this all needs to happen because God wants these men to show up also at the right time...God's providence has its ways of making it happen!

And if God wants His Son born in Bethlehem that night to one day to be thirsty and come to a well and another woman with both Jewish and Gentile parents (a Samaritan) just so happens to show up at the right well at the right place at the right time, to be the recipient of Christ's self-revelation as the Living Water, because God has again chosen to bring an outsider into His fold and into true faith in the Messiah ... then, God has His ways of making sure that woman shows up to draw water that day not a minute too late!

And if God wants His Son to be betrayed by the free sinful acts of sinful men and God wants the crucifixion to occur at Passover, the very time that Ruth and Naomi came to Bethlehem in this story, and more importantly the very day when Israel celebrated their redemption from Egypt, and if God wants to time it so that a full solar eclipse occurs at precisely the time His wrath is poured out on Jesus, which I'm told modern star software has confirmed an eclipse did take place that very day and very year and that time in the afternoon, friends, that's not coincidence, that's Providence!!

And if God predetermined to offer His Son as a sacrifice for us on the cross *at the very hour* that lambs were being slaughtered in the temple, if God wants it to be that very moment of the finale of the priestly sacrifices in Jerusalem that Jesus would die as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world for all who trust in Him ... God has His ways of making that happen as well!

And if you have not turned from your life of sin and trusted in this Jesus as your Lord and Master and Messiah and Savior, and what He did on the cross as your only hope to get to heaven, and if God wants you to hear this message on this day so that you hear the good news and have the gates of paradise swung open to you if you will surrender your life to this Supreme and Sovereign and Satisfying Savior ... God has His way of making salvation happen for sinners like you and me, for whatever reason you're here, God has His reasons for you being here. It didn't *just so happen* that you are here, it's not by chance, it's not by coincidence; it's by providence! To God, there's no accidents, there's appointments.

But you must come humbly lowly for refuge in the Lord like in v. 14. The Jesus we celebrate at Christmas used the same image at the end of v. 14 for salvation when he wept:

*“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... How often I wanted to gather your children together, **as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!**” (Matt. 23:37 NKJV).*

This grace and love is only for God’s children who willingly humbly come to the Lord for refuge from the wrath to come (the context of Matthew 23). My family and I visited a Mount Saint Helens museum and we remember reading there about how some baby birds were found alive after the ash and volcanic eruption because they were kept safe under the wings of their mother. The wrath of God will erupt, judgment will rain in the future, whether you believe it or not, that day is coming where God’s justice will bring eternal punishment on all sin. And the only way to be kept safe from the fiery fury we all deserve is to seek refuge and shelter under the secure wings of the Almighty in Jesus by trusting in what He alone can do not anything you can do.

But you’ve got to see yourself like a little chick, as hopeless and helpless and needy as a little eaglet that can’t fly or do anything, it can only huddle next to the heart of the mighty eagle it trust in. Ps. 57:1 says this is the basis for our mercy, this refuge-seeking faith.

Praise to the Lord, who over all things so wondrously reigneth,
Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!

There’s gentle sustaining and even healing under these wings, to use the language of Malachi 4:2 in the context of fiery judgment, language used in a familiar hymn we sing this time of year:

Light and life to all He brings, Ris’n with healing **in His wings**...
 Come, desire of nations come, Fix in us Thy **humble** home ...
 Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn king!”

If angels bowed humbly before the glory of King Jesus, how can you not humbly bow before Him and seek your grace in Jesus? If anything should humble us, it should be this message of God’s grace that hides, guides, provides, and invites you to come to Him.

Come, not trusting in your self-sufficiency or anything you have done as helping you get to heaven, turn from your sins and everything you have done and come to Jesus before judgment comes. Come as a lowly servant, spiritually empty, spiritually thirsty, spiritually insufficient, and come to the all-sufficient all-supreme all-sovereign all-satisfying Almighty Savior, King Jesus!