

Ruth & the Providential Hand of God:

God's Hand in Our Romance (Ruth 3)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on October 28, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ Some of you may know that my wife (Theresa) and I met in college. We met briefly our freshmen year, but our circles of friends never really intersected until our third year. That Spring Break we both participated in a short-term missions trip where she really caught my eye. And upon returning home, I couldn't get her off my mind.
 - Now at that point in my life, I wasn't ready to pursue anyone romantically. I had come out of a previous relationship that humbled me and revealed a lot of immaturity in my character and in my walk with God. I needed to grow up in many ways, most of all spiritually. So I knew it wasn't the right time to pursue anyone, even someone as attractive as Theresa.
- ❖ Now unfortunately, her attractiveness was not overlooked by my peers. They saw what I saw and I knew that too, but by God's grace, in spite of the pressure, I didn't act rashly and make my feelings known. Again I knew I was not in a place to start dating.
 - But a friend of mine was. He was a really good guy and to this day one of the godliest men I know. And he pursued her, and they began to date. In my mind, it was a lock. Why would she not want to spend the rest of her life with such a great guy?
 - But as it so happened to happen, their relationship didn't work out. And eventually I was in a good place spiritually and the opportunity presented itself to make my feelings and intentions known, and the rest is history. Over a year and a half had passed since that missions trip along with a few big obstacles, but in God's providence and good timing, we ended up together.
- ❖ And what I learned from that experience was huge. **In the end I was convinced that God's hand (though hidden) is present and active in all the events of life including what I consider mundane and ordinary – like my pursuit of a girl.**
 - Experience taught me that, but more importantly Scripture communicates this truth – that God is providentially involved in all our circumstances. And in the course of the past two weeks, I've tried to show this in the book of Ruth – a short story nestled in the heart of the Old Testament.
- ❖ **Ruth is a book about people of faith, like us, who are going through a difficult season of life.** They're just ordinary folks trying to survive in a tough economy, looking for work, burying their dead, caring for family members, looking for love, looking for marriage, hoping to start a family. This is the stuff of ordinary life.
 - And the point is that God is working in all of that. But all the setbacks and difficulties force them to wrestle with one of life's deepest theological questions, namely, ***“Does God really work in all things for good – for my good?”***
- ❖ And at this point, **Romans 8:28** had yet to be written. The Bible had yet to give a definitive answer. But one day, inspired by God, the Apostle Paul would pen these words, *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*

- **This morning I want to show how this promises is being carried out in the daily lives of two believers named Boaz and Ruth – particularly in their love lives.** I've divided this message into two parts. The first will develop the story that is unfolding in chapter 3 where I'll highlight God's hidden hand. In the second part, we'll extract principles from the text that can be applied to any of life's riskier pursuits – of which I'd like to focus on the pursuit of romantic love.

Where We've Been in the Story

- ❖ Now when we studied chapter 1, we saw how God's hand was present and active even in the suffering of our principle characters, Naomi and Ruth. Their husbands had died. They both were childless. They both returned to Bethlehem poor and empty. And in that culture, two widows on their own were as good as dead if they can't find a male protector and provider.
 - Well last week, in chapter 2, we see their fortunes turn. Not because of mere chance or blind luck, but because the Lord showed his favor through the seemingly ordinary events and ordinary people they so happen to encounter.
- ❖ Ruth goes out to glean some barely and happens to happen in the field of a man named Boaz who so happens to be a relative. He shows Ruth tremendous favor and sends her home with more than enough grain.
 - When she returns with a huge sack of barely and a crazy story of how she met this man name Boaz, Naomi's dimmed eyes are brightened. **She starts to see how the Lord is working in her suffering and her blessing all for her good and his glory.**
 - She goes on to explain the significance of how Boaz is one of their kinsman-redeemers. He's in a unique position to become that male protector and provider they so desperately need. He could potentially redeem them from their difficult and dire circumstances.
- ❖ But according to **chapter 2:23**, Ruth continued gleaning in Boaz's field until the end of the barely and wheat harvests, which lasted up to seven weeks. And in all that time, apparently Boaz made no romantic advances towards Ruth. This was a problem. Once the harvest season ended, they will no longer see each other. Things need to get moving!
- ❖ Now after coming to understand providence, Naomi is *not* lulled into a state of complacency. She doesn't try to comfort Ruth by saying, *"Honey, just relax. Don't worry about it. God's providence will take care of everything. Just sit back and watch the show."*
 - **I think that's how we tend to misapply providence. We tend to use it as an excuse for our passivity and inactivity.** We believe God is sovereign. He's in control. *"So what's the point of making plans? What's the point of taking risks and sticking our necks on the line? God's gonna go what God's gonna do, so just sit back and relax."*

Seeing God's Hidden Hand Behind a Risky, Risqué Plan

- ❖ But here Naomi is doing the opposite. **We see her moving forward, making plans, taking risks and with confidence because of providence.** Read v1. *“Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?’”*
 - Her mention of seeking rest for Ruth is a reference to finding her husband. Naomi has a plan, albeit a risky one and a bit risqué. Look at vv2-3. *“²Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.”*
- ❖ **So Naomi's plan is to get Ruth and Boaz alone together on a threshing floor.** Now what is that? A threshing floor is where you take your crops for processing. You need a way to get the kernel of barley out of its husk, so you thresh it. That means hitting the barley against the hard surface of a threshing floor.
 - Then you need a way of separating the kernels from all the leftover husks (the chaff). So you toss it all up in the air and allow the breeze to blow away the lighter chaff while the heavier kernel falls to the ground. That is called winnowing.
 - Now threshing floors were typically found outside the city gates because they were usually located on elevated outcrops on a hillside where it was windier, and often you would winnow at night when the evening breeze was stronger.
- ❖ So Naomi comes up with a five-step plan to get Boaz's attention. **Step one: Take a bath.** So far he's only seen Ruth in work clothes, with her hair pulled back, probably dirty and sweaty, and not smelling too hot. **That leads to step two: Put on some nice smelling perfume.**
 - **Step three: Put on your cloak.** The NIV says *“your best clothes”* but that's an over-translation. The cloak is nothing more than an outer garment anyone would have worn to keep warm at night. Commentators suggest that Ruth was likely still wearing the garments typical of a widow in mourning. Naomi is saying to put those clothes aside, put on your regular cloak, and signal that you're ready for a new relationship.
 - **Step four: Put yourself in front of him.** Sometimes guys are dense. Boaz is no different. We can be so focused on our work or academics. We have such one-track minds that sometimes we don't recognize when God has placed a godly girl in our lives. Now this is not to suggest throwing yourself at a guy and looking desperate. But sometimes the situation calls for you to put yourself in front of a good man to get his attention.
- ❖ **Step five: Make sure the timing is right.** Don't just run up to Boaz and say, *“I don't understand what's going on. I thought we were more than friends. We need to define the relationship!”* That might freak him out.
 - Naomi tells Ruth to pick the right time. Now this is where it gets both risky and risqué. Read v4. *“⁴But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.”*

- ❖ **First off, this is very risky.** Ruth is going out in the middle of the night, venturing beyond the safety of the city gates, all while looking beautiful. Remember these were the dark days of the judges. This is very unsafe.
 - **Second, this is very risqué.** Her preparations and choice of location all suggest the actions of a prostitute. In those days, the threshing floor was a commonly known place for prostitutes to solicit men who were working overnight (cf. Hos. 9:1).
 - **So Boaz could react in one of three ways.** He could mistake her for a prostitute and take advantage of her. But that doesn't seem likely since he's described as a noble man. More likely he would be offended by her forwardness and shoo her away thus ruining any prospect of marriage. Or, as Naomi hoped, Boaz could interpret Ruth's actions as a not-so-subtle way of saying "*marry me*" and to actually view it favorably.
- ❖ In spite of the risks, Ruth steps out in faith. Vv5-7, ⁵*She replied, "All that you say I will do."* ⁶*So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her.* ⁷*And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down."*
 - **Again, you might be wondering what kind of message this is sending.** It's no surprise that modern scholars have tried to read into this passage all kinds of sexual innuendoes. They'll say his "*feet*" means more than just his feet (Ex. 4:25; Judg. 3:24; 1 Sam 24:3) or "*to uncover*" means uncovering someone's nakedness (Lev. 18:6-19; Ezk. 22:10) or "*to lie down*" is a euphemism for sex (Gen. 19:32-33).
- ❖ **But there's good evidence to suggest they did no such thing.** None of those Hebrew words require a sexual overtone. And Boaz's response suggests nothing inappropriate occurred. Notice, at the end of v11, he calls her a "*worthy woman*" which is similar to how he's described in chapter 2:1 as a "*worthy man*".
 - Okay think about it: **A worthy man and worthy woman who are not married don't have sex in an out-of-the-way place and then tell each other how worthy they are.** And besides, if he slept with her, Boaz would have usurped the closer kinsman and his rights, which we'll see was the very thing he was trying *not* to do.
- ❖ But I think it's fair to say that the narrator was intentionally leading his readers to expect a sexual encounter (which in the days of the judges would be no surprise), but then his point is to go on and show that these two characters are worthy, honorable people.
 - Let's keep reading in vv8-9. ⁸*At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet!* ⁹*He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer."*
 - There might be a footnote in your Bible that says the word for "*wings*" could mean the "*corners of your garment*". Ancient readers would recognize this idea of spreading your garment over a woman as an expression of intent to marry (Ezk. 16:8). Like putting a ring on her finger. Ruth is, in a sense, telling Boaz to marry her.

- ❖ She's also invoking the same language he used back in chapter 2:12. That's where he praised her and prayed she would find protection and provision under the wings of Yahweh. **So now she turns around and pleads for Boaz to be the answer to his own prayer.**
 - She's saying, *"Boaz, remember when you asked Yahweh to give me a full reward because I showed kindness to Naomi and took refuge under his wings. Well I think I'll get that reward when you spread your wings over me in marriage."*
- ❖ **Then she goes on to remind him that he is a kinsman-redeemer.** If you recall last week, we said this concept was based on two provisions in the law. One stated that if a husband died without a son, the legal duty fell upon his brother to redeem (marry) the widow and hopefully bear her a son and thus perpetuate the dead man's lineage (Deut. 25:5-10). The other law said if a man lost his property, a kinsman could redeem (purchase) that piece of property so it stays in the family (Lev. 25:25). And eventually, when the child grows up, you would give him that property in order to preserve your dead relative's inheritance.
- ❖ **So to be a kinsman-redeemer came with great personal cost.** And Boaz was under no obligation to take it upon himself. Elimelech was not his brother. As well, the law said nothing about the rights of foreigners who married into an Israelite family (which in itself was contrary to the law).
 - **All that to say, Ruth's demand that Boaz marry her was highly irregular and the chance of him responding favorably was highly improbable.** Here we have a servant propositioning her boss to marry her. A Moabite propositioning an Israelite. A woman propositioning a man. A poor person propositioning a rich person.
- ❖ This is highly irregular. Ancient readers would've been shocked, perhaps offended, by Ruth's boldness to even suggest such a thing. No one would've held it against Boaz if he shooed her off as a silly woman with a silly idea.
 - **But that's not what he did. And the whole point is the only explanation for his unexpected response is the hand of God.** The only explanation is providence.
- ❖ Let's read his response starting in v10, *"¹⁰And he said, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. ¹¹And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman."*
 - Ruth's first act of kindness was staying with Naomi and not abandoning her. Now this was a second act. There were other men she could have sought, younger men in the prime. But she wanted Boaz, and he recognized why.
 - She's not just looking to fall in love. She's not looking out for her own interests, looking for any man to make her feel secure and pay the bills. **Rather Ruth, motivated by kindness, was looking to preserve her mother-in-law's family line. This demonstrates her selfless character.**
 - And the townsmen sees this as well. They know her motives are selfless and pure. They knew her to be a *"worthy woman"*.

- ❖ So here it seems as if the story has reached a happy ending. But suddenly there's a setback. Read v12, *"And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I."* Imagine how crushed Ruth must have felt, but Boaz goes on to reassure her.
 - V13, *"¹³Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning."* ¹⁴*So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor."*
- ❖ These verses highlight Boaz's character. Notice how he is obedient to God's Word. He wants to marry Ruth, but he knows the law gives that right to a closer relative first. So he's willing to wait. **He won't let his feelings and desires trump God's Word.**
 - Also notice how he protects Ruth. He knows it's dangerous for her to walk home in the middle of the night, so he tells her to stay until morning. But he also protects her reputation. He doesn't want anyone to mistake her for a prostitute. So he has her leave before anyone can recognize her.
 - And he doesn't send her off empty-handed. Read v15. *"And he said, "Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out." So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city."*
- ❖ Now imagine what must have been going through Naomi's mind the whole night. She was probably worried sick about Ruth, but then she returns. Look at vv16-17. *"¹⁶And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, "How did you fare, my daughter?" Then she told her all that the man had done for her, ¹⁷saying, "These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, 'You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.'"*
 - Again we see a "reversal of fortune" for Naomi. Remember how she accused Yahweh of bringing her back empty-handed (1:21)? Well look at her now. **The Lord has radically changed her circumstances – out of sheer kindness no less.** Naomi has begun to see that God really does work all things together for good, for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.
 - Read v18, *"She replied, "Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today."*

How Providence Inspires Our Pursuit of Romantic Love

- ❖ So we've developed the story. We've seen evidence of God's hidden hand. **Now let's draw out some principles that can apply to those pursuing relationships and pursuing marriage and to those already married.**
 - Now just to be clear, the book of Ruth is not a manual for dating. Ladies, please don't sneak into any guy's house and lie down next to his feet. That's not going to work our context.
 - **But while what is written here does not prescribe how to date, it does describe some good principles to consider.** So here are three principles for how your belief in providence can inspire your pursuit of romantic love.

- ❖ **1) Confidence in God's providence should inspire you to pursue romantic love with patience.** In other words, if you believe God works all things together for your good, then you can patiently wait for his good plan for your love life to work itself out in good time.
 - Now I realize it looks as if Naomi and Ruth were impatient, not trusting God, and taking matters into their own hands, but I don't think that's fair. I see them taking initiative, which I don't think is the same as taking matters into your own hands.

- ❖ **Now in their culture, men were the ones who pursued marriage while women were the ones given in marriage** (Gen. 2:24; Jer. 29:6). These two women were not trying to revolutionize anything. Naomi's plan simply involved a little initiative on Ruth's part to get Boaz's attention and to drop a not-so-subtle hint, but still she instructed Ruth to wait for him to tell you what to do. In the end, they still expected Boaz to take responsibility and lead.
 - **Sometimes a situation calls for a woman to make her heart known, but it still falls upon the man to lead by protecting her heart, her reputation, and her chastity.** And like Boaz, the man is responsible to address any obstacles that might be in the way of marriage, and doing all this transparently so she knows his intentions.

- ❖ This is where providence helps. **Those who rest in providence don't feel the pressure to take matters into their own hands just to making something happen in their love lives.**
 - But imagine if you didn't believe in providence and you buy into that popular belief about soulmates where there is only one person out there for you AND if you let him/her slip away without ever saying how you feel or if you wreck that relationship, then **there is a deep-seated fear that, having lost The One, you'll never be truly happy.** You'll have to settle for someone else who may be a great mate but not your soulmate.
 - **If you really believe this, then it's no surprise if you're known to be impatient in jumping in and out of relationships.** And you probably have unrealistic standards. But it makes sense to you because you have to be super sure he/she is The One. You certainly don't want to choose the wrong person.

- ❖ But a belief in providence liberates you from all this. If you believe God has a good plan for your life (including your love life) then you won't feel the need to force the issue. **Like in my case, you won't rush into a relationship, when you know you're not ready, just out of fear of possibly missing The One.** You can rest in providence knowing you will never miss out on God's good will. **That means there is no such thing as marrying the wrong person.**
 - Are there difficult marriages? Sure. Do couples have compatibility issues and real marital problems? Yes. But if you believe in providence, then you believe no matter how bad it gets – your spouse is the person God intended for you to marry. **You may be convinced you made a mistake, but I'm convinced God never does.**
 - For the married, providence inspires patience towards your spouse and your marriage. It teaches that God has a good plan, and that by his grace, no matter how deep the conflict, no matter how lacking the trust, even the most difficult of marriages can still be redeemed. Providence inspires patience.

- ❖ **2) Confidence in God's providence should inspire you to pursue romantic love with purity.** If you believe God's hand is present and active in all your circumstances, then that also means God himself, along with his hand, is right there in that room with you and your boyfriend/girlfriend.
 - Boaz knew they were not alone on the threshing floor that night. **Providence taught him God is not distant and detached but near and involved in all circumstances.** The Lord was with them.
 - Knowing the Lord is there with you in every circumstance is more than enough to inspire a young couple to not rush their physical intimacy BUT to pursue purity in their affections and to patiently wait for God's good timing within the bounds of marriage.
- ❖ **Providence also teaches that God works all things together for good, including your past mistakes in this area.** Perhaps you've blown it. You've made some big mistakes in your purity. Like Ruth you're in need of a Redeemer. You can't fix your condition. You are helpless and hopeless. But just as Ruth approached Boaz asking if he can redeem her, go to God and ask the same. Like Boaz, God will say to you, "*Yes, I will do for you all that you ask.*"
 - And then he'll point you to his Son Jesus. Jesus became your kinsman-redeemer by taking on human flesh. And just as it cost Boaz to redeem, it cost Jesus even more, even his blood shed on a cross. And like Boaz, Jesus did not rest until our redemption was complete and settled.
 - **So if you've failed in your purity, rest in God's providence and in his good grace to redeem your failures.** Things are not beyond repair. Jesus can redeem any failure, any mistake, any shame in your life.
- ❖ **3) Confidence in God's providence should inspire you to pursue romantic love with piety.** For those who are single, the honest truth is that there is no telling when (or if) God will bring a Ruth or Boaz into your life. But in the end, we know that Ruth and Boaz finding each other was never the main point of the story.
 - The whole point is that all Ruth longed for Boaz to fulfill – that is, to redeem her losses, her shame, her emptiness – is ultimately fulfilled through the Lord Jesus, the Redeemer that Boaz typified. Ultimately she's looking for Jesus.
- ❖ **Single people, I urge you to seek first Jesus and his righteousness and to get right with God before you go about seeking Mr. or Mrs. Right.** Put that pursuit first because the truth is, everything we hope to find in romance, in a husband or wife, is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus and your relationship with him.