

Ruth & the Providential Hand of God:

God's Hand in Our Blessing (Ruth 2)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on October 21, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ If you've never heard of Corrie ten Boom, she's a hero of the faith you should really get to know. The best source would be her autobiography *The Hiding Place*. It speaks of her family's involvement in the Dutch resistance during WWII. They helped harbor Jewish refugees by building a secret hiding place within Corrie's bedroom. It was rather effective until the day they were betrayed by an informant, which led to their arrest and placement in a Nazi concentration camp. Her autobiography chronicles these heroic and horrific events.

- ❖ Now last week we began a sermon series on the book of Ruth focused on God's providence. That is, focused on God's hidden hand that works out his good purposes in all the events and circumstances of life – and not just the good events and happy circumstances but also the tragic and painful ones. So we focused last week on God's hand in our suffering.
 - And if anyone had reason to be bitter about God's hand in her suffering it would be Corrie. If anyone had reason to complain that God was treating her badly, it would be someone in her shoes. Yet she's the source of a wonderful illustration of how God's sweet providence can work through the bitterest of circumstances.

- ❖ I've shared this before. **She's the one who told us that life is like a tapestry.** From the underside, it looks like a chaotic mess of tangle threads. It makes no sense. You would have no idea what the weaver has in mind or what the final product is supposed to look like.
 - In the same way, we have no idea what God has in mind as he weaves together the various threads of our lives. But every stitch, every mundane and seemingly random event in life, every joyful and painful experience, is stitched by the hand of a good and great God. **What makes no sense now is part of a tapestry, and once the weaver is done and he turns it over, you'll finally see a beautiful work of art.**

- ❖ **So trying to make sense right now of all the painful circumstances in life is like trying to figure out a tapestry from the underside alone.** In this life we only see the underside. Yes, for those who share the hope of heaven, one day we'll stand by God's side and look down upon the tapestry and see the big picture. But right now we have to walk by faith.

- ❖ And that is where Naomi and Ruth find themselves at the end of chapter one. **Trying to walk by faith when all they see is a chaotic mess of circumstances that looks far from beautiful.** We learned that in those days a famine was in the land of Israel, which led a man named Elimelech to move his family to Moab. But there he dies, leaving his wife Naomi.
 - Their two sons marry Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. But after ten years, both couples are unable to bear children and both sons die. So Naomi, Orpah and Ruth are left widows with no means of support. The tapestry looks ugly at this point.

- ❖ But then a glimmer of hope in chapter 1:6. Naomi receives word that the LORD (Yahweh) has visited his people and given them food. So as she prepares to return, she urges her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and find new husbands. Orpah complies, but Ruth clings on and commits herself to the people of Israel and to their God (1:16).

- ❖ So by the end of chapter one, Naomi and Ruth enter Bethlehem as two poor, helpless, widows. But a contrast is beginning to form between the two. Naomi, whose name means ‘sweet’, has responded to suffering with self-pity and has resigned herself to bitterness.
 - But Ruth, whose name likely means ‘to refresh’, responds to the same circumstances by stepping out in faith and becoming a source of refreshment for Naomi’s bitter soul.
- ❖ Look at chapter 2:2. This is Ruth rejecting self-pity and walking by faith. “*And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor.”*” Instead of wallowing in bitterness, she is hoping to encounter a kind landowner who will show her some favor. Life is difficult right now, but she’ll do her best to put some food on the table.
- ❖ **Now as we move into chapter 2, we’re quickly reminded that the threads that God uses to weave our tapestry are *not* all difficult.** They’re not all painful. In fact, many are good and pleasing. We’re reminded that the final tapestry contains sorrowful *and* joyful strands.
 - But many times we take the joyful for granted. We’re well aware of suffering and God’s hand in it, which leads us to shake our fist at the sky. But oh how often we fail to attribute the good and pleasing circumstances in life to the same hand of God.
- ❖ Something good happens to you and you think, “*Wow what a coincidence!*” A friend helps you out of a mess and you think, “*Wow he’s so kind. What a good friend!*”
 - And we fail to see that hand – that hidden hand moving in the background. I’m talking about God’s hand of providence weaving kindness and favor into your life. We easily miss it if we’re not looking at our circumstances through eyes of faith.
- ❖ But by the end of chapter 2, Naomi and Ruth are starting to see the threads of blessing in their tapestry. **By the end of the chapter, Ruth’s search for favor in someone’s eyes is fulfilled in a man named Boaz, but we learn that, in the end, he’s acting as a channel for the Lord’s favor.** In this morning’s passage, we learn three lessons about the Lord’s favor.

The Lord’s Favor Found in the Seemingly Random

- ❖ The first lesson is this: **1) The Lord’s favor can be found in the seemingly random.** When we think of God’s hand working in history or individual lives, we usually think of the miraculous. We think of the Ten Plagues or the parting the Red Sea – something spectacular. But notice how there is not a single miracle in this story.
 - We don’t read of Naomi’s husband or sons being raised from the dead. There is no manna miraculously appearing on the ground. In this story, we never see the visible hand of God working overt miracles. *But why should that surprises us?*
- ❖ *Isn’t that more like our lives?* Sometimes it’s hard to relate to Bible characters because their lives are full of crazy miracles. There’s a huge disconnect with the rather mundane, ordinary lives we live.

- But we can relate to Naomi and Ruth. **Miracles are just as rare in their lives as ours because God’s normal way of working in our lives is through providence.** Providence is God’s hidden hand working through ordinary folks and ordinary events to accomplish his extraordinarily good purposes.

- ❖ Let me show you this starting at the end of chapter one. *“And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barely harvest.”* (1:22) Yahweh had truly visited his people and indeed blessed the growing season so that a ripe harvest was at hand.
 - So Ruth goes out to look for some food. **Fortunately in those days, there was a welfare system in place.** Israel’s law instructed harvesters to work through the fields only once and whatever was missed or dropped was left for the poor and the alien, the orphan and the widow. As well you were not to reap the corners of your fields but to leave it for the poor to work (Lev. 19:9-10).

- ❖ Now watch what happens in v3. *“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, who was of the clan of Elimelech.”*
 - Now this is good storytelling because the narrator doesn’t flat out show you God’s hand but he leaves us some big clues. Here’s one of them. In v3 it literally says, *“she happened to happen”* upon this field. Or as we might say today, “As luck would have it” she ended up on Boaz’s field.
 - What are the odds? How many fields must there have been along the Judean countryside? She could have gone anywhere, and yet she happens to happen on the field of Boaz, who just so happens to be of the clan of Elimelech.

- ❖ Now chapter 2:1 already revealed this fact. *“Now Naomi had a relative of her husband’s, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.”* Two things jump out. **First, the fact that Boaz is related to Elimelech is huge.** Because in their culture, individuals had a greater responsibility to help the wider family when needs arose. And in this culture, two widows on their own are as good as dead if not for a male protector and provider. And Ruth just so happens to happen upon a male relative’s field.
 - And not just any male relative. **The second thing that jumps out is the way Boaz is described as a “worthy man”.** That same phrase is translated elsewhere as *“a mighty man of valor”* (Jdg. 6:12). Not only does that mean he has money (i.e. a landowner), he has a noble character, evident a few verses later in the way he goes beyond the requirements of the Law to help a poor Moabite. Boaz was a man of good standing.

- ❖ Now we, as readers, have a heads up, but remember Ruth knows nothing about Boaz or his relationship with Elimelech. She doesn’t even realize she’s on his field. **She just picked one at random. But unbeknownst to her, she was doing exactly what the Lord had providentially planned to happen.**

- This fact is reinforced by v4. “*And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem.*” Behold! It’s the narrator’s way of saying, “Look who just so happened to show up.” The very man I told you about, this worthy man of valor who happens to be a relative.
- ❖ From human eyes, it looks like one big coincidence. It just so happened to happen. **But the whole point is that God’s hand was actually behind the scenes bringing about this apparent coincidence in order to show his kindness and favor.**
 - It was true then and it’s true now. Nothing the Lord desires is left up to chance. Nothing comes down to luck. All is planned and all is carried out by his hidden hand.
- ❖ **Just reflect back upon those seemingly random occurrences that resulted in something favorable or positive in your life.** That car accident you barely averted. That check in the mail when you were on your last dime. That chance encounter where you ended up meeting the person you would one day marry.
 - **It’s so easy to chalk it up as coincidence. But with eyes of faith, we see that in fact it was the Lord weaving threads of kindness and favor into our lives.** May the sight of this reality produce in us a heart of thankfulness for the way God subtly blesses us AND a heart of contrition for all the times we take that for granted.

The Lord’s Favor Felt Through Human Hands

- ❖ So the first lesson is that the Lord’s favor can be found in the seemingly random. **2) The Lord’s favor can touch us through human hands.** If I were to make the claim that *God healed me*, you would probably expect to hear a testimony about some miraculous healing I experienced that went against all medical odds and baffled all the doctors.
 - But imagine if my story went like this: “*Yeah I wasn’t feeling well, so I went to see a doctor. The nurses ran some tests. Then the doctor gave me a diagnosis and wrote me a prescription. I got it filled out by a pharmacist, and in no time I was feeling a lot better. Like I said, God healed me.*”
- ❖ You might be thinking, “*What do you mean ‘God healed you’? You just got healed the ordinary way through medical professionals.*” Exactly. And why do we assume that God only heals through overt, spectacular miracles AND not as well through the hands of ordinary doctors, nurses, and pharmacists?
 - **Providence teaches that God is hidden in our human vocations, and his favor is, more often than not, felt through human hands.** We see this in Ruth’s experience of the Lord’s favor. It came through the ordinary hands of a man named Boaz.
- ❖ Let’s look back at vv5-13, the passage we read together earlier, and let me point out a few things. Here we see Boaz return to his field to find Ruth gleaning behind his workers, and he inquires about her.

- ❖ Now the narrator makes a point of reminding us that she is a foreigner – a Moabitess no less. Other landowners probably would've chased her off, but in v8 Boaz immediately accepts her and says she can keep coming back to his field. He then tells her to “*keep close to my young women*”. He’s granting her permission to work alongside his female servants to glean in the main section of the field and not just the corners. He also gives access to their water supply, and he warned his young men not to touch or harass her.
- ❖ **You have to realize that Boaz was going way beyond his legal duty. This was pure favor – kindness beyond what's expected.** Ruth recognizes this in v10. “*Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?”*” In other words, why are you doing this?
 - Boaz says that he heard about her and the kindness she showed Naomi and how she left her people and Moabite gods to commit herself to Israel and Israel’s God. And then in v12 he offers a prayer for her. “*The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!*”
- ❖ What a great image! **He’s comparing Ruth to a helpless baby chick who has taken refuge under the wings of the mother hen.** He’s praying that she finds protection and provision under Yahweh’s wings. **And of course the whole point is he is the very answer to his own prayer.** The Lord's favor towards Ruth – his protection and provision – will be felt through human hands, Boaz’s hands.
- ❖ And the Lord’s favor continues to pour on in v14. The law did not require Boaz to feed the gleaners, but he invites Ruth to lunch with him and his servants. She eats to her heart’s content and even gets to keep leftovers. And it gets better. In vv15-16 Boaz instructs his men to be deliberately careless, dropping sheaves on the ground for Ruth to pick up. V17, “*So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley.*”
 - Now an ephah is about 35-50 lbs of barley. Compare that to the output of an average worker which is about 2-5 lbs a day. That means Ruth gleaned in one day what took an average male worker two weeks to produce.
- ❖ So imagine Naomi’s shock when Ruth returns home with a 50 lbs sack of barley and a box of leftovers. Look at v19. “*Where did you glean today?*” Immediately she realizes that’s a silly question since no one gleaned that much in one day. Ok next question, “*Where have you worked?*” Wait, she realizes, not even workers make that much in a day. The only explanation is someone must have shown favor to Ruth. And before asking who it is she cries out, “*Blessed be the man who took notice of you.*”
 - Keep reading, “*So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, “The man’s name with whom I worked today is Boaz.”*” **And suddenly that heart of Naomi’s which had grown so hard and bitter began to melt.** Her suspicions about God's goodness suddenly vanished. It took one word – one name really – Boaz.

- ❖ Naomi knew the significance. She explains at the end of v20. *“This man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers.”* **According to the law, a widow in Naomi’s situation could appeal to a male relative to serve as a kinsman-redeemer.**
 - This idea was based on two related provisions in the law. One stated that if a man lost property, a kinsman had legal right to redeem the land so it stays in the family (Lev. 25:23). The other law stated that if a family lost the father by death, then a kinsman can redeem the widow by bearing her children and thus perpetuate the deceased man’s lineage.
 - That being said, a man like Boaz was in unique position to help Naomi redeem her husband's property AND to potentially marry Ruth and perpetuate the family line.

- ❖ None of this escapes Naomi’s attention. So she immediately invokes Yahweh’s blessing on Boaz. Look at v20. *“May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.”* Now the Hebrew here is intentionally vague as to whose kindness she's referring to – Boaz's or Yahweh's? Whose kindness has not forsaken her? The answer is both.
 - **Naomi is clearly grateful for Boaz's kindness, but now she realizes that the Lord's hand, his kindness, is hidden in Boaz's.** This is providence. She gets it now.

- ❖ Consider how far she's come. Remember at the end of chapter 1, Naomi was convinced that God was only weaving bitter threads in her tapestry, that he only painted with bitter strokes. **But by the end of chapter 2, she could not deny that the Lord was still good to her, that his kindness had not forsaken her.** The indisputable evidence was before her eyes – a 50 lbs sack of barely from the hand of Boaz. This was proof of the Lord's favor.
 - Now conceivably she could've chalked it up as mere coincidence. She could've attributed Boaz's generosity to the fact that he's a noble man. She could've thanked her lucky stars that nice guys still exist. And in doing so, she could've completely overlooked God's involvement.

- ❖ We do that all the time. When something good happens we consider ourselves lucky. **When people treats us kindly, we just think it's because they're good folks with good hearts. We don't normally attribute these kind of things to God's hand.** Now if something crazy and unexplainable happens to us, then we're sure it's from the Lord.
 - But this passage is challenging us to consider if it's possible that hidden in the comforting hand of a friend is actually the hand of God. *Is it possible that behind your friend's warm face is actually the face of God?* I know it takes the eyes of faith to see this.

- ❖ But this is what providence teaches – that when the Lord works in our lives, when he blesses us in kindness – it's not just through the spectacular or the miraculous. **Providence teaches that God's normal means is to work and bless through ordinary events and ordinary people who happen to show us favor.**

- As one commentator puts it, **God's grace normally has a human face.**¹ And in Naomi's case, she properly recognized the Lord's grace in Boaz, and that realization was all it took to revive her faith and restore her hope.

- ❖ **And for Christians today, the human face of God's grace is, first and foremost, that of Jesus Christ.** If you think about it, the similarities between Boaz and Christ are striking. In fact, the story of Ruth is a fitting illustration of the gospel story.
 - Elimelech moved his family out from under God's wings of refuge, and his family suffered the consequences. Likewise our Father Adam stepped out from under Yahweh's wings and his children (you and me) have suffered the consequences.
 - As Ruth grew up a foreigner to God's covenant, enslaved to pagan gods and idols, we too grew up estranged from God and enslaved to sin and idolatry. As Ruth went poor and hungry, we too go spiritually starved and bankrupt.
 - **As Ruth had nothing to offer that could obligate someone's help, we too have nothing to offer God that obligates his help.** Our only hope, like Ruth, is for the Lord to look upon us with favor – with sheer grace – and radically change our circumstances.

- ❖ **And just as Boaz arrived at the right moment to meet Ruth, Jesus arrived at the fullness of time to meet us.** Like Boaz was to Ruth, Jesus became our relative. He took on our flesh. Like Boaz, Jesus was a worthy man, in fact the worthiest man to ever live for he walked in perfect obedience to his Father. And like Boaz, Jesus was fit to become our kinsman-redeemer – to purchase us back into relationship with God.
 - Like Boaz, Jesus lavishly provided food to hungry, desperate people. **But unlike Boaz, Jesus offered his own flesh and blood as spiritual food for the spiritually starving.** When Christians eat the bread and drink the cup in the Lord's Supper, we are recalling and proclaiming the self-sacrifice of the righteous (Jesus) for the unrighteous (sinners) that he might bring us to God.
 - And if the Lord's favor, demonstrated through Boaz's kindness, was enough to revive Naomi's faith and restore her hope, then **the Lord's favor, demonstrated by the crucified and risen Christ, is more than enough to give believers today overwhelming evidence that God is still good and his providence is still sweet, even in their pain.**

- ❖ Friends, if right now you're in a difficult season of life, please know that God's grace has not forsaken you. He has not abandoned you to suffering. I know it's hard to see, but his blessings are still in your life. **Perhaps your just looking in the wrong place. Instead of looking for the clouds to part, you should be looking at the faces around you.**

¹ Dean Ulrich, *From Famine to Fullness: The Gospel According to Ruth*, 67.

- And most of all, look to the face of Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face, and you'll realize that no amount of suffering in this life could ever match the eternal good that he purchased for you with his own blood. The Lord's favor is there, my friends, if you're looking with eyes of faith.

The Lord's Favor Reciprocated by Those it has Blessed

- ❖ So what we can glean about the Lord's favor here in chapter 2 is that 1) it's found in the seemingly random and 2) it's felt in the seemingly ordinary touch of human hands. And now let's close with an application. Our third lesson is this: **3) The Lord's favor should be reciprocated by those it has blessed.**
- ❖ We see this principle lived out in Boaz's life. In contrast to Elimelech, he sought refuge under Yahweh's wing even when the going got tough, and the Lord's favor to him was evident. He had fields full of barely and crews of hired servants working under him.
 - **He was blessed by the Lord and now he sought to be a blessing to others.** He wanted to reciprocate the favor. And he could not have chosen a riskier or costlier way to do so.
 - Boaz reached out to help a poor, widowed Moabitess with unmatched generosity that would certainly impact his bottom line AND with an apparent disregard of his reputation. Because people are going to talk. Rumors will spread. His intentions will be questioned. Why is he being so nice to this Moabite woman?
- ❖ **Boaz knows the risks attached to a blessed life lived for the blessing of others.** He knew a life of love lived for others is risky and costly. And the same is true for those who call themselves Christians, who follow the Lord Jesus.
 - **Like Boaz, you have the chance to be the face of God's grace to those he has placed in your life.** He has shown you favor for that very purpose.
- ❖ *Is there someone in your life right now for whom you can be the face of God's grace?* Perhaps there's someone in a difficult mess. Someone in great need either physically, financially, or emotionally. Perhaps someone like Ruth – the poor in society, the stranger, the outcast. God's providence is weaving kindness and blessing into your life that you might reciprocate it to another. Who might that be?