

The Lord Graciously Provides

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[0 : 0 0] Now, for our Bible reading, we are turning again to the book of Ruth and to chapter 2. If you're using the church Bibles, that's on page 222.

Just a quick word about chapter 1. A couple from Bethlehem called Naomi and Elimelech had left their homeland and gone to the neighboring country of Moab because of a famine in their own land.

It seemed to go well, and then tragedy struck. Elimelech died, and their two sons died, and three widows were left, Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah.

And Ruth had returned with her mother-in-law to Bethlehem. And this is where chapter 2 starts off. We'll read the whole chapter. Chapter 2, verse 1.

Then Boaz said to Ruth,

[1 : 5 9] Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young woman. Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them.

Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn. Then Ruth 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?

But Boaz answered her, All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.

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. Then she said, I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant.

I am not one of your servants. At mealtime, Boaz said to her, Come here and eat some bread, and dip your morsel in the wine. So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed her roasted grain.

[3 : 1 6] And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her.

And also pull out some from the bundles for her, and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her. So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned.

It was about an ephah, 22 liters of barley. And she took it up and went into the city. Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied.

Her mother-in-law said to her, Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you. So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, The man's name with whom I work today is Boaz.

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead. Naomi also said to her, This man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers.

[4 : 23] And Ruth the Moabite said, Besides, he said to me, You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest. Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, It is good, my daughter, that you go out with this young woman.

Less than another field, you'll be assaulted. So Ruth kept close to the young woman of Boaz, Gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord. Now, I could ask you to have your Bibles open, please, at Ruth chapter 2. And we'll have a moment of prayer. Lord of time and of eternity, Lord of earth and of heaven, Lord of the great dramas in our lives and of the everyday, we ask that these words we have read, spoken to people long ago in a totally different context, that they may come to us not as what you once said, but as what you are saying to us now.

And as we listen to the written word, we will indeed be led to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen. Now, a phrase we often use nowadays is spending quality time with people.

We know what we mean, and it makes sense, unless we remember, of course, that all time is quality time, because all time is a gift from God.

[6 : 09] Nevertheless, there are certain moments in our lives, certain days, certain occasions, which are especially significant, after which nothing can ever be the same again.

If you say to somebody, will you marry me? Whatever the answer is, that's going to change the dynamics ever after, isn't it? And we never know when the everyday is suddenly going to become the dramatic.

And so it is here in the book of Ruth. Chapter 1 began with a kind of leisurely tale that lasted for some 10 years. But as good stories always do, there's a variation of pace here.

And this chapter, most of it takes place on one afternoon. And similarly, chapter 3, which we'll look at next week, takes place on one evening. It is a single day in the harvest fields outside Bethlehem, and an enormously significant meeting takes place.

Although neither Boaz nor Ruth realized just how significant it was at that time. Nevertheless, it's a significant moment, and it tells us a great deal, not only about Boaz and Ruth, it tells a great deal about the gospel, about our lives as they are shaped by the Lord.

[7 : 26] Because it's also a story of God's providence. Now, providence is not a word that occurs in the Bible, but it is absolutely everywhere, the idea. Providence, put it simply, is the creator who made heaven and earth, who made everything visible and invisible, and who made you and I.

Doesn't just let the show run on its own. He's totally involved at every moment, at every time, at every place. That's what the doctrine of providence is about.

It doesn't overrule human actions. We'll see. We still have to make choices. We know that. Nevertheless, God works these into a pattern, into a tapestry, if you like.

And that providence is amazing. After all, Jesus says, not a sparrow falls to the ground, but your father. The translation say, knows, but there's no word for knows.

Not a sparrow falls to the ground, apart from your father. Remember, we are told, the very hairs of our head are numbered. Less of a problem for the Almighty, with some of us, than with others.

[8 : 33] But nonetheless, it's astonishing, how every detail, of our lives, and indeed, of the life of the universe, belongs to the Lord. And I'm going to call this, the Lord graciously provides, because this is a story about God's provision.

It's a story about bread of heaven. I want us to look at this story, as it develops. And first of all, in verses one to three, God takes a hand in the events.

I don't mean by that, he hadn't taken a hand before. Obviously, his hand had been there, unseen. But now he specifically intervenes, to carry the story forward, and to find a possible way out.

Now, Naomi and Ruth had returned. They are back in Naomi's homeland, the homeland that Ruth had adopted, as her own. But they are still, helpless widows.

No national security, no obvious protector. So, we need to know, what's going to happen. What's going to happen, is a new character, is introduced into the story.

[9 : 40] Now, Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man, of the clan of Elimelech, whose name, was Boaz. Notice how cleverly, the story builds up. We're not told his name, at the beginning.

Told us, this man, he's a relative, he's a worthy man, a man of standing, and his name, is Boaz. And, he is going to be, hugely significant.

And then, Ruth takes the initiative. Obviously, verse, verse, two, let me go to the field, and glean among the sheaves. As I said, the providence of God, does not mean, we don't have to make decisions.

If you, want to get a job, and it doesn't mean, you sit and expect, the providence of God. You've got, you've got to, you've got to interview. You've got to do your best, and so on.

You don't pass an exam, simply by saying, oh, if the Lord wants me to pass it, I'll pass. Because, we have to, act responsibly. And so it is here. Now, notice that Ruth, is called, the Moabite.

[10 : 46] A reminder, that she's not only a widow, but an outsider. Now, presumably, Naomi had told her, about the laws, and the Pentateuch, and Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, which permitted the poor, to glean behind the reapers, at harvest time.

But this story, this story, is very, is very tight-lipped, in many ways. We have to fill in a lot, of the background ourselves. So a new character, comes into the story.

Ruth takes an initiative. And then, look at this phrase, this, it happened. See, she set out, verse three, and she happened, to come. Now, in a world, as I say, governed by God's providence, there's no such thing, as coincidence.

When, our author says, she happened, to come, what he means, is not that God, wasn't in control, but that neither, Boaz, nor Ruth, arranged this.

Well, how could they? Neither knew, of each other's existence, probably. Well, we learn later on, that Boaz, had heard of Ruth, but he'd never met her, and up till now, Ruth hadn't heard of him.

[11 : 54] So, it's not coincidence, it is the hand of God, working. The story of providence, and human activities. Tomorrow is Monday. It's awfully important, we try, not to divorce, Sunday, from Monday.

If we divorce, what we do on Sunday, from what we do on Monday, then Sundays, are soon going to become, very unreal, because they're divorced, from the rest of our lives. Rather like, the rich guys, in Amos, who, at the great festival, say, I wish the festival, was over, so you could go back, essentially, to cheating, and fleeting people.

And, so often, we think, he is Lord, of Sunday, but he's not Lord, of Monday, to Saturday. And, we don't know, how significant, our actions, are going to be.

It's totally unclear, what's happening, at this moment. But, nevertheless, Ruth takes the initiative, trusting in the Lord. We saw this last week, how this woman, showed something, of the faith of Abraham.

We'll come to that again, later in the chapter. So, God takes a hand. Now, most of us know, what we're going to be doing tomorrow. Although, there'll be surprises.

[13 : 12] Remember, we never know, when God, is going to intervene, in a dramatic way, or perhaps, in an undramatic way, in our lives. Our lives belong to the Lord.

So, that's the first thing then. Now, the second thing, the major part of the chapter, verses 4 to 17, is a significant meeting. Verse 4, And behold, Boaz.

ESV, with its fondness for archaisms, and behold, Boaz. You could probably get this, probably be, render something like this, who do you imagine, turned up, but Boaz?

Because, the word behold, we don't really have an equivalent, in contemporary English, has something, of that sense. You'll never guess, what happened. You'll never guess, who I met, and so on.

And this is the point here. Now, there's one or two things, we learn about Boaz, right from the beginning. And first of all, his courtesy, to those who are working, for him.

[14 : 11] Verse 4, He said to the reapers, The Lord be with you. And he is a good leader. I mean, one of the signs, of a good leader, is courtesy, and care, and genuine interest, in those, in those whom they are leading.

He's no sense of superiority, and, I'm tempted to say, this kind of thing, could solve many disputes, on the shop floor, and other places, if this were, if this were followed, more often.

Now, that does not mean, that we have to show our discipleship, by dropping pious phrases, all the time. It's not what it means. What it does mean, is we need to bring, the presence of Jesus, into the everyday.

Presence of Jesus with us, by his spirit. How many people have said, they've first been drawn to Christ, not by, what somebody said, but by the way they lived, obviously, there have to be words spoken.

Nevertheless, it's this Christ-like, fragrance, if you like, coming from lies. Paul talks about this, the sweetness, of fragrance of Christ.

[15 : 15] And, honesty, and transparency, every part of life, belongs to the Lord. That's one of the great things, throughout the Bible. There is no part of life, which does not belong to him.

Even those, probably not the most scintillating chapters, in the Bible, Leviticus 11 to 15, things like mildew in houses, bodily emissions, and all the rest of it.

Basically, what these chapters are saying, is there is no part of human life, that doesn't matter, to the Lord. And so it is here. So, he comes across as a courteous, polite, good man, essentially.

And then, in verse 5, we have the initial attraction. Then Boaz said, whose young woman, is this? Now, it could have been love, at first sight.

This happens. Going to a crowded room, and the eyes beat. It does happen. Maybe it's happened to some of you. We mustn't spiritualize it, and be super spiritual.

[16 : 21] After all, the first thing a couple need to ask each other is, are we attracted to each other? Or, to use a theological phrase, do we fancy each other? And, there is no, so there is no denying, there is the beginning of interest, in both of them.

Now, some commentators, have gone woefully, and dreadfully, astray here. On the one hand, you get some people, there is a predatory older man, who is taking advantage, of a helpless foreigner.

That does happen. I mean, some of the, some of the horror stories, you get about these poor girls, who come from Eastern Europe, and so on. It does happen. Or, on the opposite extreme, this is a shameless young woman, throwing herself, at a good, and generous man.

There is absolutely, no hint of that, anywhere, in the text. What there is, clearly, is that there is, there is an interest, there is a growing attraction.

After all, the Bible itself, is a love story. God, the great lover, is calling a bride, for his son. And this is one of the illustrations, of it, surely.

[17 : 29] Anyway, whether he fell in love, with her then, or whether it gradually grew, over the seven or eight weeks, which the chapter takes to happen, or rather, the end of the chapter takes to happen, we, we don't know.

But certainly, there is a dawning, of interest. So, his courtesy, his humanity, and then, the other thing is, he goes beyond the letter, of the law.

The law says, in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, at harvest time, if you, if you're reaping, and sheaves fall, leave them there, don't pick them up, and they can be given, to the poor.

Now, Boaz goes further, he deliberately tells, his young men, to leave stuff, not just the stuff, that's dropped, deliberately tells them, to leave, leave some more. Verse 16, pull out, some from the bundles, for her, and leave it for her, to glean, and do not rebuke her.

And he protects her, against unwelcome interest. And Ruth is, totally overwhelmed, by this kindness. Verse 10, she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, why should I, find such favor?

[18 : 39] I'm a foreigner. And then Boaz reveals, that he has heard, of Ruth's own kindness, to her mother-in-law, Naomi, who is his relative.

The point is, this is a man, whose life, has been touched, by grace. You know the grace, of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, for our sakes, he became poor, though he, through his poverty, might be rich.

And he shows, in this most practical way, food and drink. Behind it all, of course, is the bread of heaven, which feeds us now, and evermore. Because behind it all, is the Lord's, own generosity.

This is a book, about the covenant. This is a book, about the Lord, who gives himself, holy, generously, and ungrudgingly, to his people. It's interesting, what he says, in verse 11.

All you have done, for your mother-in-law, since the death, of your husband, has been fully told to me. And notice, how you left, your father, and your mother, and your native land, and came to a people, that you did not know.

[19 : 48] Deliberate recalling, those words, used by, use of Abraham. Leave your family, leave your father's house, and go into the unknown. And use later, of Jacob, in Genesis 31.

He's linking, over the people, of the covenant. Just as, in James chapter 2, the faith, of Rahab, of Jericho, is linked, with the faith, of Abraham.

Faith, radically, democratizes, everything, doesn't it? By faith, we're all equal. We're all equal, before the cross, aren't we? In our sin, in our need.

What will we be, before the throne? All equal, in our gratitude. And that's it. And this, this story here, well, as I say, it's a real human story, we mustn't allegorize it.

Nevertheless, it is a window, into the heart of God. The God, the God who is, shares himself, so generously with others. And all this is underwritten, by the shared meal, in verses, verses 14 to 16.

[20 : 52] End of our service, we're going to meet, around the Lord's table. And the Lord, and it's no accident, that our Lord, asked for us, his people, to remember him, around a shared meal, with all its implications, of fellowship.

And as I was saying, the shared meal together, underlining, the generosity of Boaz, and behind that, the generosity, of the Lord, would call Boaz.

And notice, that Boaz, deliberately instructs, the people, not to harass her, and not to, and not to be, ungenerous to her. And you'll notice as well, she doesn't rest, on her laurels.

Verse 17, she gleaned in the field, until evening. You know, a person less, less generous, less faithful, than Ruth, might well have said, well, I'll just knock off, for the day.

She doesn't. She is, she's responding, to his generosity, by her own, working for a full day, complete reversal, of the famine, with which the story opened.

[21 : 55] The story began, with famine, and the chaotic, days of the judges. And now, we're in harvest time. But the final section, verses 18 to 23, we've seen, how God takes a hand, we've seen, the significant meeting, but now, the need to keep, on trusting.

I think that's, so important as well. We mustn't read, a story like this, then go away, and say, oh this is all wonderful, this is all, going to work out. The scene now, shifts back, to Naomi's home, and a conversation, where the two women, reflect on the day, which has passed.

I think the first thing, to notice is, Naomi, begins to realize, God is at work. Verse 20, Naomi said, may he be blessed, by the Lord, whose kindness, has not forsaken, the living, or the dead.

Naomi also said to her, this man is a close, relative of ours, one of our redeemers. She's moved on, from her bitterness, at the end of chapter one, so last week, she said, the Lord, has brought me back, empty.

And we saw, that is true, but it's not the final word. And here, she's beginning to see, that God is working, for her good. Boaz, is a redeemer, I'll say more about this, next week, but very briefly, this, this bullet, comes from the family laws, of old Israel.

[23 : 18] If people, the redeemer, the senior relative, sometimes called, the kinsman redeemer, was responsible, for purchasing, property, once owned, by family members, and, which they had lost, by poverty.

And if they were enslaved, to buy them back. And you read about this, in the great chapter, Leviticus 25, the year of Jubilee, when the, the picture, of people being, bought back, from slavery.

The redeemer, redemption, this is one of the great, gospel words, isn't it? Boaz, is the one, who will pay the price, to get Ruth, and Naomi, out of poverty.

And Jesus, as the old hymn, Jesus paid it all, all to him, I owe. So there's a picture here, in this story, once again, of this great, redemption word.

Buying back, from slavery, by, we have a debt, that we cannot pay. And Jesus paid it all. There's always no significance, of verse 23, the last verse, of the chapter.

[24 : 24] So Ruth kept close, the young woman of Boaz, gleaning until the end, of the barley, and wheat harvest, and she lived, with her mother-in-law. They've got provision, for now, but what about the future?

Now the barley, and wheat harvest, would take about, seven or eight weeks, in, we're talking about, May and June. And, after that, what's going to happen then?

Ruth still has no home, of her own. Ruth still has to trust, so does Naomi. What will happen, if there's another famine? These are the kind of questions. And, once again, on the level of story, this is, this is filling it, with suspense.

So, Naomi has to trust. It's not that, she's met Boaz, everything is well. We'll remember this as well, in our earthly lives. God, graciously brings us, many good things, many blessings, people, other, other blessings as well.

But, ultimately, we still have, have to have faith. I compared Ruth, to Job last week, at the, the bleak scene, at the beginning of Ruth, recalls that of Job.

[25 : 35] Now, Job's family, and possessions, were restored. But, Job would have to, still live with faith, to the end of his days. How would he know, that this family, and these possessions, were any safer, than the previous ones?

What was Ruth's security then? What is our security? The security, is that the God, in whom we trust, is the one, who overflows, with generosity.

The one, who is committed to us, in his covenant, by promises, that he will not, and that he cannot break. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord God, we know, that in your providence, you pursue us. Your love guides us, and you follow us, all the days of our lives.

We know, there are perplexing, and tragic times, like in chapter one, of this book. There are happy, and significant times, like in chapter two. But we thank you, Lord, that you have promised, that you will be our God, forever and ever, right to death, and indeed beyond it, in the glory of your presence.

[26 : 49] And we thank you for this. Amen.