

RUTH AND GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE
RUTH 2:1-6

INTRODUCTION

Today's subject is God's providential care. A famous theologian once gave an insightful description of this Biblical doctrine. This is how theologian Huckleberry Finn described it in the book of the same name: **"Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body's mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see that there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him any more. I thought it all out, and reckoned I would belong to the widow's if he wanted me, though I couldn't make out how he was a-going to be any better off then than what he was before, seeing I was so ignorant, and so kind of low-down and ornery."** (*Huckleberry Finn*, Chapter 3)

There is a Biblical basis for Huckleberry Finn's analysis of God's providential care. There is a negative aspect of God's providence. God cares enough about people to whack them on the side of the head if they get too far out of line. That can be a painful experience. It can even be fatal when people are so stubbornly resistant that they spit in His face and deny His clear direction for their lives.

God's providential care also has a delightfully positive side as He cares for those who trust in Him. Such is the aspect that we see in the passage before us this morning. But first we will review the negative side of things which we have seen in #1.

I.

So first we will review the negative aspect of God's providential care which we have seen in #1. Consider then NAOMI AND HER OBLIVIOUSNESS TO GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE (Review). (PROJECTOR ON--- I. NAOMI AND HER OBLIVIOUSNESS...)

We are dealing with the period of the Judges, which stretched from roughly 1300 to 1000 BC. (ISRAEL TIME OF JUDGES MAP) This was after Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land of Canaan and before King Saul took the throne of the kingdom. Before their entrance into the land Moses repeated God's instructions handed down on Mt. Sinai. He laid out for the Hebrews the blessings that would result from following His instructions and the curses that would result from disobeying them. The curses included famine and barrenness and death. This was the negative side of God's providential care.

As parents we do not tolerate having our kids run out into busy streets. If they continue to do that after verbal reprimands, we might choose to spank them. If they still continue with such misbehavior, they might be run over and killed.

The Melech family, with parents Elimelech and Naomi and sons Mahlon and Chilion, chose not to stay in the land of promise when a famine struck Bethlehem and the territory of the tribe of Judah. (BETHLEHEM TO MOAB MAP) They also chose to live in territory occupied by traditional enemies of Israel who worshipped false gods. The sons married Moabite women. All of these things were contrary to God's instructions. The family suffered negative consequences from bad decisions. Elimelech died. The sons had no children. The sons died. Naomi was left with two Moabite daughters-in-law.

Naomi blamed God for all of this. She decided that he was unjust and unloving, at least toward her. She didn't acknowledge that her family had made decisions that were contrary to God's instructions. She did not recognize that in the midst of this genuine tragedy that there were signs of God's providential care for her. She was blessed with two daughters-in-law who loved her. They were even willing to return to Bethlehem with her. Then the Lord also providentially brought rain and fruitfulness to the fields of Bethlehem. Providentially that news made its way back to her and was enough to provoke her to return home.

Yet, according to v. 20 of #1, **"She said to them [her daughters-in-law], 'Do not call me Naomi [which means "pleasant"], call me Mara [which means "bitter"], for the Almighty had dealt very bitterly with me.'"** Naomi and her family have messed up. They have suffered for it. Yet she is unwilling to recognize the negative aspect of God's providential care.

In August of 2009 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America gathered in Minneapolis for its biennial convention. On the schedule for Wednesday the 19th at 2 PM was a discussion of the possibility of changing the denomination's position on homosexual practice with a decision to be made later to allow practicing homosexuals to be ordained as pastors in their churches.

That day started out sunny and pleasant in Minneapolis. Meteorologists were not predicting any bad weather for the day. But as the day progressed, clouds appeared. Immediately after the 2 PM session was begun, warning came of an approaching tornado. Delegates were quickly ushered in to the central part of the convention center. According to one weather historian a tornado had not struck downtown Minneapolis in 90 years. But it did that day. It barreled straight for the convention center. Part of the roof was torn off of the building. Central Lutheran Church across the street, which was serving as host church for the convention, and whose staff was in full support of the proposed resolution, also was struck. (PROJECTOR ON--- TORNADO PICTURE) The cross on its steeple was bent over and left hanging down.

The delegates were left a bit shaken. But after the storm had passed, they resumed their deliberations. The proposed resolution was passed with the exact number of votes

necessary for approval. The providential statement of a higher authority was seemingly overlooked. (*World*, 9/26/2009)

II.

Let's get in to #2 then as we consider BOAZ AND HIS FRUIT OF TRUST IN GOD'S PROVIDENCE. (II. BOAZ AND HIS FRUIT OF TRUST...) Our passage today alternates back and forth between a focus on Boaz and on Ruth. So I will proceed to go straight through the text. As I do that, we will jump back and forth between Roman numeral II and Roman numeral III as we go back and forth between Boaz and Ruth and see their involvement with the providential care of God.

Let's begin then with v. 1: **"Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz."** Thus we are introduced to Boaz. The word "relative" could also be translated as "friend." But the reference to "clan" means that he is some kind of relative of Elimelech. The term "clan" referred to a grouping between immediate family and the larger tribe--- in this case, the tribe of Judah.

The term that the ESV translates as "a worthy man" has some significance. In Hebrew it is *ish gibbor chayil*, which literally means "a man, a warrior of strength." The term *gibbor chayil* often appears in the context of military conflict and is typically translated as "mighty man of valor" or "great warrior." There is no reference to warfare in our present context. It is possible that Elimelech was a military veteran. But the word *chayil* basically means "firm", or "strong." In some contexts it may have the idea of wealth. Sometimes it may have the connotation of power or influence. We will later see this word used of Ruth. So we will come back to it in a later message. In this verse I am inclined to think that the basic idea is that Boaz was a man of influence in the community. He was a player. Perhaps he had a military background. Clearly he also had wealth. He was an important man in Bethlehem.

III.

Verse 2 switches our focus to Ruth. So we are going to move down to Roman numeral III and RUTH AND HER PURSUIT OF GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE. (III. RUTH AND HER PURSUIT OF...) According to v. 2, **"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.' And she said to her, 'Go, my daughter.'"** Notice that the author reminds us that Ruth is a Moabite, a foreigner.

The Book of Deuteronomy, which contains Moses' summary of the Law from God given to Israel just before they entered the land of promise, has this brief explanation of gleaning. In #24 vv. 19 & 20 (DEUTERONOMY 24:19) we are told, **"When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. (DEUTERONOMY 24:20) When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow."** This was God's welfare system. It was

not just a handout. People had to work to get their food. But this was a way for the disenfranchised, people like Ruth and Naomi, to get food for their table. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Ruth takes the initiative to do this gleaning. Why did Naomi not join her? Remember, the two of them had just completed a long journey on foot. Naomi was older. I suspect that she was worn out. We were told that the two of them went to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Ruth realized that the time of the barley harvest was limited. If the two of them were going to have food to eat, she needed to get going.

Verse 3: **“So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech.”** This was a risky adventure for Ruth. She was a single, unattached, young woman. She was a foreigner. The moral and spiritual climate of the time of the Judges was not good. We find examples in the Old Testament book of that name where women were mistreated.

But Ruth seems to be trusting God. So the text says that she “happened” to come to the field of Boaz. Literally it says “her chance chanced upon” this field. From a superficial perspective her arrival at this field may have seemed like chance, just like the first tornado appearing in Minneapolis in 90 years may have appeared like chance. But the reader with a spiritual sensitivity is expected to see the providential care of God at work. For the narrator reminds us that Boaz is related to Ruth’s father-in-law.

Verse 4 switches our attention back to Boaz. There we read, **“And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, ‘The Lord be with you!’ And they answered, ‘The Lord bless you.’”** Look, the author says, Boaz just happened to show up. He was a rich man who had many fields. He had a trusted foreman watching this crew of reapers. He didn’t have to show up at all. But he just happens to show up on the day when Ruth came to glean.

When Boaz arrives, he greets his workers with a reference to YHWH, the God of Israel. We quickly sense that Boaz is a true believer. He is confident in God’s presence. He gets an appropriate response from his workers. Boaz is a businessman who sets a godly tone for his workplace. He has come to check on his workers, but he recognizes that there is a higher authority who is also present. I suspect that most of us would rather work for one who believes in some kind of accountability to a sovereign God, rather than a pure secularist who recognizes no higher authority than himself.

Verse 5: **“Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, ‘Whose young woman is this?’”** Boaz knows his workers, and he has some familiarity with the gleaners who follow them. He doesn’t recognize Ruth. Notice how he frames his question: “Whose young woman is this?” This was a patriarchal culture. It is still that way in much of the Middle East, especially in the Islamic world. Women are expected to have some dependence upon a male figure of authority--- a husband, a father, or even a brother.

According to v. 6, **“And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, ‘She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab.’”** The foreman has general knowledge about Naomi and Ruth. He stresses that she is young and she is a Moabite. It would be like dealing with a woman today from Russia, or Communist China. She doesn’t have a good national background. We know that Ruth was married for about ten years. But we need to remember that women in that culture typically married as teenagers. So Ruth may still have been only 25 or 26 or 27 or 28.

We switch back to Ruth in v. 7 as the foreman recounts her conversation with him: **“She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.’ So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest.”** The scholars regard this as the most difficult verse in the whole book to translate because of the Hebrew grammar and the rare words which are used.

My interpretation of what the original words are saying is that Ruth showed up at this field and went directly to the foreman to ask permission to work close to the reapers. This was not something that gleaners normally did. Given her status as a single woman and a foreigner this was a rather bold request. The foreman was hesitant to give her an answer. So he waited until Boaz to show up so that he would decide. Ruth was hanging around until that answer came.

Ruth is being pretty courageous in making this request. She risks being rejected. The owner might kick her out. But the harvest is already well underway. Ruth feels responsible not only to provide food for herself but also for her mother-in-law. She seems to be trusting in God’s providential care.

We go back to Boaz in v. 8 where we find his first direct address to Ruth: **“Then Boaz said to Ruth, ‘Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women.’”** This brief statement tells us a couple of things about Boaz. First, he is considerably older than Ruth. She is more in the age range of a daughter. Second, Boaz is taking Ruth on with the protection and provision that he would provide for a daughter. This is a man of character.

I doubt that Boaz had any romantic intentions. He is a godly guy. He realizes that this is an era where everyone did what was right in his own eyes. There were too many places around that were like the south side of Chicago. Unlike Ruth’s father-in-law who chose to leave Bethlehem when a famine struck, Boaz stayed. He trusted and obeyed God. That trust in God has produced a character that looks out for the disenfranchised people of the world. So he gives Ruth a “most favored gleaner” status.

Boaz continues in v. 9, **“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.”** While Boaz may have tried to establish a virtuous workplace environment, he realizes that

young men in his crew are not beyond the possibility of taking advantage of a young foreigner. So he has warned them. Normally foreign women would be expected to draw water for Israelites. But Boaz wants Ruth to drink what the young men have drawn.

We skip back to Ruth in v. 10: **“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?’”** This bowing down was a typical Ancient Near Eastern response of respect to a superior authority figure. Ruth recognizes that she has been the object of kindness from a *gibbor chayil*, a man of influence.

She notes that she has found “favor” in his eyes. She uses here the Old Testament word for “grace.” She recognizes that in the eyes of the world she has no position of *chayil*, of strength. She is a woman. She is an unattached woman. She is a foreigner. She is a Moabite, a member of a people group which has a reputation for mistreating the Hebrews. Yet she is being treated with grace. She is even being brought into a position of a family member.

In doing this Boaz is acting in a Christ-like manner. The Apostle Paul in the New Testament Book of Ephesians addressed Gentile Christians in #2. He called them strangers and aliens to the covenants of promise. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 2:13) But he added in v. 13, **“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”**

We switch then back to Boaz in v. 11: (PROJECTOR OFF) **“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.’”** Notice that we have confirmation here that Ruth’s parents were indeed still alive. In going to Bethlehem she was leaving her parents behind.

Boaz also recognizes the courage and faith of Ruth in making the decision that she did. She imitates by her actions the behavior of the ancestor of the Hebrews. Abraham left his home by faith and went off where he did not know where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8)

The statement from Boaz also says something about him. He is a good man who cares about virtuous behavior. He is the product of life which has entrusted itself to God’s providence.

Boaz continues in v. 12: **“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!”** Boaz recognizes that Ruth has come to trust in God’s providential care. Now he calls upon the Lord to reward this Moabite woman who has sought refuge in YHWH. Ironically Boaz is going to have a significant part in providing this full reward.

We switch the focus in v. 13 back to Ruth: **“Then she said, ‘I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants.’”** There are two reasons which Ruth gives for her gratitude. First, Boaz has allayed her fears. He has comforted her. Ruth realized that the spiritual climate of the day and her status as a woman and an unattached woman and a Moabite put her at risk. Second, Ruth was thankful because Boaz had spoken kindly to her. Literally she says that he has spoken heartfully. This generous response she describes as having found favor. The term which is used is that Old Testament word for “grace.”

She also describes herself as a servant. But the particular term which she uses is the lowest kind of servant. Despite this lowly status Ruth has received more encouragement from this man of influence than she has from her own mother-in-law.

In vv. 14-16 we go back to Boaz. Verse 14: **“And 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 to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over.”** That Boaz hangs out with the reapers says something about his character. As a wealthy man of influence he probably did not need to stay in the fields in the middle of the day. He could have relied upon the foreman to take care of business. Or he could have insisted upon having his noon meal only with the foreman.

Also we see that Boaz is drawing Ruth toward a status as a family member. As a lowly servant she might have been expected to serve these native Israelites. Instead this man of influence is serving food to her. She is beginning to experience a full reward. Gleaners normally acquired only enough to get by.

In New Testament days the Pharisees were the most respected religious leaders in Judea. They taught that Jews should avoid contact with Gentiles. They certainly should not have a meal with them. Yet their ancestor Boaz is hanging out with a lowly servant girl from the ancient enemies of Israel, the Moabites. Perhaps there is also a foreshadowing here of what Jesus did in meeting a Samaritan woman by Jacob’s well.

The story continues in v. 15: **“When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, ‘Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her.’”** The scholars are not certain about the exact meaning of the instructions of Boaz here. Perhaps he was letting Ruth take some of the grain which had already been cut but not yet tied in a bundle by the women who usually followed the reapers and did that tying.

Boaz continues his instructions in v. 16: **“And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.”** The meaning of this instruction is clear. Boaz wants Ruth to get extra grain. Boaz has become the fulfillment of the implied prayer of Ruth in v. 2. There she was trusting God to find favor, to find grace, as she went out into the fields near Bethlehem. Now her pursuit of God’s providential care has born fruit. The Lord has providentially connected this Gentile

woman who is pursuing God's care in the midst of difficult circumstances with a godly man who is the product of a life which has trusted in God's providence.

Perhaps the best New Testament expression of this principle of trusting in God's providential care is found in Romans #8 v. 28. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 8:28) There the Apostle Paul declares, **"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."** That working of all things together for good may not always be obvious to us. It may be delayed. It may not be fully accomplished until we get to heaven and receive an eternal reward. But the assurance is that God will providentially care for us in a positive way when we seek to love Him.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Roy Smith grew up not knowing his father. He said, **"I felt like I was robbed. Everybody has a father. Why don't I have a father?"** Fortunately Roy had some father-figures in his life. He had godly influences that helped him become a serious Christian. In fact he became a pastor.

Still, he observed, **"There were times when I was very uncomfortable, especially as a minister. When it's Father's Day and you are encouraging congregations to spend time with their father, there is something missing."**

Roy Smith experienced a certain amount of success as a pastor. The small church which he pastored began to outgrow its rented space. So the church board decided to purchase their own building. They had some difficulty in finding a lender who would provide them with the necessary loan. But then a broker came along who assured them that they could get the money which was required.

The broker had Pastor Smith sign a lot of paperwork. The church got the loan. But then some months later Roy Smith received a visit from the FBI. It turns out that the broker inflated the church's assets to get the loan. Pastor Smith signed the documents without examining them carefully. That overstatement of assets was a federal crime. Pastor Smith's signature was on the paperwork. So he was charged with committing fraud.

The federal judge did not treat Roy Smith very kindly. He sentenced the pastor to 15 months in prison. He was sent to a federal facility in Pennsylvania. As he went through the intake process, he was assigned to share a cell with an inmate by the name of Roy Milton. It turns out that Roy Milton was his father. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROY SMITH AND ROY MILTON) What do you suppose are the odds of that connection coming together? Pure coincidence, or the providence of God?

It was a strange reunion. Pastor Roy did not know whether to hate his father or to love him. A few days later his father showed Roy the younger his collection of newspaper clippings. **"He knew stuff about me when I was in the newspaper for high school accomplishments, when I got married, even the case on why I was sent to prison. So he was aware of what was going on with me, and all these years I felt that he not only did not know, but he did not care."** His father later said, **"When I came**

across an article of him opening his first church, it was like a father's pride. Even though I was in jail, it made me walk around with my chest stuck out."

Several months later Pastor Smith was asked by the prison chaplain to speak at a chapel service. For the first time his father came to one of these services. At the end of the service the chaplain asked Smith to give an altar call. His father walked forward with tears streaming down his cheeks. Roy Milton later recalled, **"God made me come to terms with myself. He opened the gates and let me out, and that's the beginning of my freedom."**

The relationship between father and son grew. A few weeks later Smith was released early for good behavior. His father was released months later. Pastor Smith says, **"All things do work together for good. My love for God is stronger now; my commitment to the Lord is stronger. I couldn't imagine my life any other way now. I thought I was living before, and I think I've only just begun to really live in that abundant life that is promised to believers."** (CBN.com, 7/15/2013) (PROJECTOR OFF)

"All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." God's providential care extended to His wayward children can be painful, as it was with Naomi. But it can be a beautiful thing for people like Ruth and Boaz who choose to love God and pursue obedience to His word. It can be a beautiful thing for us, too, if we choose to follow Him.