

## **Coincidence or Providence? – Ruth 2 – November 11, 2018**

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As we continue our series in Ruth, chapter two begins with a statement there was a certain man Bethlehem who was not only prominent and of good standing, but was also a relative of Naomi, through her dead husband. Apparently, Naomi had not remembered him up until now or she would have probably sought aid from him, and Ruth certainly did not know of him. But for us it is foreshadowing of what is to come.

Ruth and Naomi were in a precarious position – both are sonless widows, without social standing or resources. Not only that, but Ruth was a foreigner from a country whose people were despised. The Jewish law required people to give aid to widows and the poor. Gleaning was one type of aid. Landowners were instructed, that during harvest time, they were not to reap to the very edges of their fields, or take all the fruit from the vineyard or orchard. Instead they were to leave the excess there for the poor and the foreigners to gather for food. A modern example of this might indeed be the idea of the food pantries.

Since it is harvest time, Ruth tells Naomi that she will go out to a field and glean behind the reapers and perhaps find favor in someone's eyes. Naomi tells her to go, but offers no insight as to where Ruth might begin her search. Ruth is in a strange place and doesn't know anyone. I picture her walking out the door, standing, looking all around her and saying, "Now what?" She begins walking and finds herself in the part of a field belonging to Boaz. Coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not.

Ruth finds a likely spot and asks the field supervisor if she can glean among the sheaves. Later on Boaz arrives, giving a blessing to his reapers and receiving one in return. Noticing Ruth, Boaz asks the supervisor who she is, or rather to whom she belongs. It is typical to the setting, that the man doesn't name her. He refers to her as being the Moabite, the one who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab. She has no identity. She has no husband and is no one's servant. She is not a member of the community. She is identified only by her place of origin. She's that foreigner, and she has come here wanting to glean among the sheaves. And that shows great deference to the landowner, who just happens to be Boaz.

Now Boaz knows exactly who she is. He has heard the tales about Naomi's return from the land of Moab and of the daughter-in-law who showed Naomi kindness and loyalty that went well beyond the call of duty. Boaz immediately shows his protection of her by addressing her as "my daughter." He invites her to remain in his field. He warns her to stay close to his young female servants. He assures her that he has told his young men to not bother her or prevent her from drinking water that they have drawn.

Ruth is astonished by his kind actions toward her. She falls to the ground before him, in an exaggerated expression of thanks, asking him why he would take notice of her, that she should find favor in his eyes, when she is a foreigner. Boaz was well aware of her loyalty, her "hesed" toward Naomi, and he tells her that. He sees that she is a woman of worth. Boaz then prays that her full reward would come from God, "under whose wings you have come for refuge." Ruth responds with the wish that she might continue to find favor in the eyes of Boaz, as he has spoken kindly to her, or more accurately, has spoken to her heart, even though she is not one of his servants. More foreshadowing that her future lies somewhere beyond simply being his servant

It's too bad our translation here does not give us the full effect of the meaning of the Hebrew words. Many of the words spoken by Ruth and Boaz have multiple meanings that produce a sort of romantic undertone to their conversation. The original audience of the book of Ruth would have picked up on the subtext right away. The idea is there is something more going on here, a possible attraction and mutual interest growing between the two.

The next setting is of a meal. Boaz continues to do more than expected by law when he invites Ruth to join him and his reapers, which signifies her inclusion into his household. By offering her food, he takes on the role of spouse. She eats until she is full and is given the leftovers to take home to her mother-in-law Naomi. Boaz then instructs his reapers to allow Ruth to glean among the sheaves and to even pull out some handfuls of grain from the bundles and allow her to glean from them as well. At the end of the day, she had somewhere between 30 and 50 pounds of barley to take home with her. Naomi is completely astounded by Ruth's good fortune and offers a blessing "to him who took notice of her," and asked Ruth where she worked. Now remember, Ruth does not know the connection between Boaz and her late husband's family, but when Naomi hears the name, all the pieces seem to fit into place.

Naomi, who had been full of grief and bitterness, who had blamed God for her horrible state, suddenly begins to see the wider picture and exclaims, "Blessed be he by the name of the Lord, whose kindness (or "hesed") has not forsaken the living or the dead!" God had not forsaken Naomi after all, but may have provided a way out of her despair. Suddenly Naomi realizes that Boaz might function as their kinsman-redeemer. The Hebrew word is "goel" which refers to a male relative who ensures that the family property remains held by family members and who prevents a relative from entering slavery. For a widow, a goel is a true blessing.

The chapter ends with Ruth continuing to glean during the remainder of the barley harvest and also through the wheat harvest, a period of about seven weeks. During this time, she stayed close behind the women servants of Boaz and lived with her mother-in-law Naomi. Nothing more is said about any interaction between Boaz and Ruth. But we'll find out more next time.

For now, let us look at what has happened here. When the chapter began, Ruth was headed out to glean. She knew no one and had no destination in mind. She could have ended up at anyone's field. As both Naomi and Boaz warned her to stay close to the women workers, it was apparently not uncommon for unprotected women to be victimized or worse by the men working in the field. It was not uncommon in fact for widows to have to take up prostitution in order to survive. Ruth could have ended up in any number of negative situations. As a Moabite woman, she was a foreigner. A widow from a land despised by many Hebrews. She could have chosen a field owned by someone with a great hatred or prejudice toward Moabites.

But none of that happened. Not only did Ruth find a field in which she could glean without fear of violence or molestation, she found a field whose owner was kind and generous. And not only was Boaz kind and generous, he was exceedingly kind and generous. Impressed by Ruth's act of great loyalty and kindness toward Naomi, Boaz also showed her benevolence that went well beyond what was expected. And not only that, but Boaz was kin to Naomi's dead husband Elimelech, which meant, if something romantic were to happen between Ruth and Boaz, Naomi would no longer have to fear for her own future. She would have a family to care for and protect her. Coincidence? Or providence?

The Doctrine or teaching about providence is complex. If we believe God is Creator, the one who made all things, the next question is, what do we believe about God's ongoing relationship with Creation? And how we answer that question has to do with how we understand God's level of control over things, or God's sovereignty. Does God create and then step completely out of the picture, waiting to see what happens? Or can God influence or cause things to happen? And then depending upon how much control we believe that God has over the way things happen, the question comes, how do we make sense of how we see God working in a world that is so full of pain, evil, and heartache. Providence is very complex.

A passage from the Book of Romans is helpful in making sense out of providence. You've probably heard it, Romans 8:28, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God." Things may be really, really bad – but the doctrine of providence tells us that God will bring good out of it, God will provide. Our lesson from Ruth shows us that even

though Ruth and Naomi were widows without any means of support, God provided a way out. Sometimes God's presence in our times of trial is not so obvious. Sometimes there is no way out. But in some way, even in those situations where God seems so very far away, God is there with us, hurting with us. And we believe that God can still bring out of that pain something positive. It may take years. It could take a whole lifetime, or even generations. But the doctrine of providence gives us hope – that in the darkest of times, somehow, somehow, God will bring light. In some form or another, God will provide.

The saying goes hindsight is twenty-twenty. And I think that is true about our understanding of God's providence in our own lives. How many times have things occurred in your life that seemed coincidental at the time, and then eventually, you were able to look back and see how all the pieces seem to fit into place, like some complex puzzle. Out of chaos, some semblance of order begins to take shape. Sometimes it's only a new path that becomes open in front of us, and then it is up to us to take those first steps. Many times God uses other people when God acts providentially in our lives. In the case of Naomi and Ruth, God had provided a possible solution to their dilemma and now it will be up to all the people involved to move forward and act. And we shall see what happens in this next chapter. So we too should allow God to use us in the lives of others. We know we are surrounded by a hurting world – family, friends, neighbors, strangers. When we follow the path of Jesus Christ in our lives, doing those things in love that he modeled for us, then we provide to God a way for God to act providentially in the lives of others. And when we love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves, then we provide to God a way for God to act providentially in the lives of others.

The doctrine of providence isn't simply some band-aid to be placed on situations of trauma, violence, suffering, hatred, and loss. Nor is providence simply the glib affirmation that father God knows best. The doctrine of providence is hope – it is in fact the assurance that God is with us in our time of pain – God knows our pain - and we can go forward, knowing that a light shines in the darkness. And that light is Jesus Christ, the one who overcame all darkness.