

December 8, 2019

A GRACIOUS PROVIDENCE

Ruth 2-3

(2 of 3 in a series through Ruth)

In a chapter titled “Repentance That Sings,” Bryan Chapell tells the story of Dan and Carol Walker, a couple who welcomed their new son into the world on November 8, 1995.¹ At first, everything seemed fine with the baby. After fifteen minutes after his first feeding, however, he started turning blue, went limp, and seemed to be dying. It was discovered that the valve in his esophagus wasn’t operating correctly, and he needed surgery. To do such a surgery on a newborn would be scary, and so during surgery, the family obviously felt the weight of the situation. Therefore, when the doctor finally walked in and announced that surgery had been successful and their son would be fine, everyone in the room cheered and spontaneously burst into singing the Doxology.

After telling that story, Chapell notes that if we could see the danger of sin in our lives in the same way we perceive physical dangers—like that of disease or disability—then we would understand that repentance should be followed by cheering and singing, just like that which took place in that hospital room after a successful surgery. And in light that of true and glorious observation, I think it might be said that just as Ruth 1 opened our eyes to see the dangers and consequences of sin in our lives, chapters 2-3 should open our hearts to want to sing. The reason is not only because the bitterness and blame that we saw in chapter 1 has been replaced by joy, trust, and gratefulness but because we see the gracious providence of God in full light. And my hope is that as we see this in these chapters, we’ll be moved to want to recognize God’s gracious providence in our own lives and to trust and obey the gracious God who makes himself known in this way.

What I want to do this morning is to talk through each of these chapters under two headings that will guide us in recognizing what is going on in this middle section of the book of Ruth. The first heading is simply “A recognition of God’s providence,” and the second is “An act of trusting obedience in light of God’s gracious providence.” Let’s start then with the first.

A recognition of God’s gracious providence

When we refer to God’s “providence” what we mean is that the God who created the world and everything in it didn’t simply create the world and walk away, leaving it to itself, as if winding up a watch and then leaving it alone to let it run. Rather, the Bible presents God as being intimately and meticulously involved in his creation, directing everything according to his purpose (a “hands-on” approach, we might say). And what we see in Ruth 2-3 is God’s gracious providence,

¹Bryan Chapell, “Repentance That Sings,” in *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 286-88.

which is to say God graciously directing all things according to his purpose which involves showing great kindness to his people.

Chapter 2 begins with the introduction of a new character named Boaz. We read in verse 1, “Now Naomi had a relative of her husband’s, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.” And he comes into play because after Ruth and Naomi settle back into Bethlehem, Ruth decides that she needs to work in order to help provide for herself and Naomi. So, she suggests to Naomi that she go out into a field and see if she might find someone who is willing to be gracious to her and allow her to harvest some of the crop. The reason she might go this route is because the law of Moses had given commands to harvesters, telling them to leave the crop at the edge of their field as and not to go back and gather what they may have dropped along the way (Lev 19:9-10), and this would allow the poor person or sojourner to come along after them and take those extras.

Well, we’re told in 2:3, “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.” And when you see the biblical author write something like, “she happened to come to” as if it was completely of chance, we’re to see it as an ironic statement, as the author is “screaming, ‘See the hand of God at work here.’”² These are chapters that celebrate God’s gracious providence, as we’ll especially see by the end of chapter 3.

Now, eventually Boaz, the owner of the field shows up, and he asks the one supervising the harvest for him who this woman is. The man answers that she is the Moabite woman who came with Naomi, asked to gather the leftover bits of the harvest, and has been working hard all day in gathering. And with that, Boaz knows exactly who she is. The news of her kindness toward Naomi had begun to spread all through the area. So, he tells her to stay in this field he owns, to work right alongside the other young women who are reaping in his harvest, to not worry about any men harassing her, for he has instructed them not to touch her, and to drink as much water as she needs. Ruth, of course, is overwhelmed at his kindness. After all, she is a poor, widowed woman from Moab. There is nothing in her eyes that should deserve such kindness. However, Boaz notes that he’s heard of what she’d done, leaving her land, her family, and her people to come and devote herself to Naomi and the God of Israel. Thus, he responds to her, “The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given to you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” (2:12). Nor does his kindness stop there, but he invites her to dinner and further instructs his men to go ahead and pull off bundles of grain for her and intentionally leave them on the ground so that not only will she have grain, but grain that she doesn’t even have to work to harvest.

So Ruth works until evening, and she goes home to Naomi with a good amount of barley. Naomi, of course, is impressed with this, so she asks, “Where did you glean today? And where

²Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 653.

have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you” (2:19). And Ruth answers that the man’s name is Boaz.

And this is where we get to see that the Naomi who had once said, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me” has changed. She answers, “May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” (2:20). Now, you may remember in chapter 1 there were places where Naomi was linking herself with her language to the grumbling, untrusting Israelites in the wilderness. Well, with this response, she seems to be echoing the language of Abraham’s servant in Genesis 24:27 who after finding Isaac a wife in Rebekah explained, “Blessed be the LORD . . . who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master.” That is, instead of ignoring her responsibility for her bitterness and blaming God (as we saw in chapter 1), she sees this blessing as solely the work of God’s gracious providence and faithful kindness to her and to her husband who had died. She has now become the kind of woman who looks at life and credits God for his blessing. This is the fruit of repentance. But Naomi knows that there is more to this blessing than simply Ruth being able to gather grain. She tells Ruth, “This man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers” (2:20).

Now this could be lost on us because we don’t have this category of a redeemer, so let me explain what it is. According to OT law the Lord had prescribed for the clans of Israel to serve as “redeemers” for one another. In other words, if you were a close relative of a man who died, then you would serve as a “redeemer,” being responsible to make sure that his land didn’t pass out of the clan (Lev 25:25-30), buy the freedom of any in his clan who’d had to sell themselves into slavery because of their poverty (Lev 27:27-55), make sure justice was executed against any who’d wronged his clan (Num 35:12, 19-27), and receive and handle any money that was due him (Num 5:8).³ And obviously in the extraordinary case of a man dying, his son marrying, and then his son dying without having any children, a redeemer could reasonably take the widow as his wife, care for her, have children with her, and continue the man’s line. But we’re getting just slightly ahead of ourselves because chapter two ends with the passage of a little time before chapter 3 begins. We’re told in 2:23 that Ruth gleaned from Boaz’s field not only through barley harvest but through wheat harvest as well, so she’s been there several weeks.

So, it looks like things are set up in a good way, doesn’t it? Ruth is settling in. She’s left her family and false gods of Moab to come and cling to Naomi and the one true God. There’s no reason Boaz couldn’t take her as his wife. She’s at this point no longer a foreigner but a convert. She’s the equivalent of Rahab. Remember Rahab? She had a rough past. She was a prostitute from a foreign people. But she converted as well, joined Israel, and married an Israelite named Salmon. So there is precedent for this kind of thing happening. But do we really think that Boaz, a faithful Israelite and virtuous man, could really be convinced that a foreigner could really repent, come into the people of Israel, and be a fitting wife for a faithful Israelite? Well, guess

³Each of these is noted by Block, 674.

who his mother is? It's Rahab. I've got a feeling he'd seen about as close as anyone what the transforming effect of redemption can look like.

Here we are then. Ruth "happened" to wander into a field where a man was more gracious to her than he could have imagined, and that man "happened" to be closely related enough to Elimelech and Naomi that he could be a redeemer, and he "happened" to be the son of a woman who'd been outside of Israel but had joined them and been a faithful Israelite. Obviously we're to recognize that none of this "happened" to take place. This is God's gracious providence, his hand working for the good of his people, and the glory of his name. And the great thing for us is that this God is our God as well, who has saved us, promised to work all for our good, and is conforming us to the image of his Son. How should we then live? Well, that brings us to chapter 3, which we'll look at under the heading of "An act of trusting obedience in light of God's gracious providence."

An act of trusting obedience in light of God's gracious providence

Chapter 3 begins with Naomi hatching a plan. She recognizes that she should be looking out to make sure Ruth is cared for and recognizes that Boaz could fittingly do that as a relative who qualifies as a redeemer. She also knows that Boaz would be winnowing barley at the threshing floor that night. This act of threshing involved tossing the grain up in the air so that the chaff would blow away and what you wanted would fall to the ground. And it was common to do it at night because the winds would be a bit less active. Moreover, because you didn't want anyone to take your grain, you'd often just stay the night there with the harvest until morning. This sets the stage for what's to come.

Naomi tells Ruth to wash herself, put on some perfume, put on her cloak, head down to the threshing floor, don't let Boaz know she is there, approach him after he's gone to sleep, uncover his feet, lie down at his feet, and wait to do what he tells her. Now, that's all a bit odd, so let's try to clear it up. First, some have suggested that what is suggested is immoral. After all, prostitutes, knowing that men might stay overnight at the threshing floor would approach them and seduce them. Moreover, "feet" can be used as a euphemism for the male reproductive organs, so that Naomi is suggesting for Ruth to do something quite inappropriate in telling Ruth to "uncover his feet." But that's not what's going on here. This isn't an immoral suggestion by Naomi or an immoral act by Ruth. We know this because Ruth is spoken of as a virtuous woman ("worthy," 3:11), and Boaz is spoken of in the same way ("worthy," 2:1). Consequently, not only would Ruth not seek immorality, but even if she were to do so, Boaz would surely rebuff her attempt. Also, the word used for "feet" in 3:4 isn't the word that is used when it's meant to indicate the euphemism. It actually just means the lower legs and feet.⁴ Well, what's going on then?

⁴Ibid., 686.

Well, let's start with Ruth being told to bathe, put on perfume, and then put on her cloak. This is exactly what we're told that David did in 2 Samuel 12:20 after he was mourning over the loss of his son. The text tells us that once he was informed that his ill son had died, he washed himself, anointed himself with perfume, and put on his cloak (the same word used here). And what it communicated was that the time of his mourning was over. Similarly, it is quite reasonable that Ruth had been wearing the garments of widowhood, to show that she was still in mourning. Consequently, no man would have thought of approaching her in marriage. But by bathing, applying perfume, and putting on this cloak, she would have been signaling that her mourning was ended, and she was ready to move on in life, including getting married if possible. In other words, Naomi is telling Ruth that it is time to go get a husband, she's got a good one in mind, and she sees clearly how this could happen.

So Ruth did what Naomi suggested, waited for Boaz to finish his work, eat and drink, and lie down for the night. Then she quietly approached him, uncovered his feet, and lay down at his feet. Then we're told, "At midnight the man was startled [perhaps because his feet are cold and send a chill through his body] and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet!" (3:8). So, he appropriately asks, "Who are you?" Ruth answers that she is Ruth, his servant, but then she boldly adds, "Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer" (3:9). And that's nothing less than a marriage proposal.

And Boaz is overwhelmed at her godliness and her faithfulness. He says, "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" (v. 11). The reason I say he's overwhelmed at her godliness and faithfulness is because the word translated "kindness" is the same word used in 2:20 of the Lord, and it is a word that refers to God's covenant faithfulness and steadfast love. So, Boaz is not just saying she's being kind; he's noting her godly faithfulness. Why? Well, he understands that when she asks him to marry her, saying, "For you are a redeemer" that she isn't simply interested in getting herself a husband. If that were the case, he notes, she could have just gone after younger men. They no doubt would have been interested in her. But that is not her aim. She is driven by a love for her mother and deceased father-in-law because by seeking out a redeemer she is specifically attempting to make sure that Elimelech's line is preserved. In fact, this is so clearly her motive in Boaz's eyes that when he informs her that there is another actually who is more closely related to Elimelech and could serve as her redeemer, he says in 3:13, "Remain 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."

Do you see? If Ruth simply wanted Boaz, then Boaz would be way out of line telling Ruth, "Well, let me go talk to another guy, and if he wants to marry you, you'll marry him." Why in the world would he think she'd go for that? But, if he sees that she's simply seeking a redeemer because she's primarily driven by love and care and faithfulness to another—namely, her mother-in-law and deceased father-in-law—then this makes complete sense, and it highlights that she is not only not a selfish woman but one whose godliness and faithfulness is overwhelming (especially in light of the fact that she is a Moabite!).

But this mention of a closer potential redeemer is a potential foil in the plan, isn't it? Well, in one sense it is, we'll have to wait till chapter 4 to see how it resolves itself. But in another sense, the reader is far from concerned. After all, God's gracious providence is clearly guiding all of this. I mean, it's reasonable to think that Boaz wouldn't wake up, mistake Ruth for a prostitute, and commit sexual immorality. After all, he's a godly man. But how could Naomi think that he wouldn't wake up, see her, and just shoo her away, thinking she's a prostitute? Wouldn't that be more reasonable than what transpired? I think it's because Naomi understood God's heart and power and trusted in his lovingkindness and faithfulness. And sure enough, it happened as she imagined.

Boaz tells Ruth to stay there till morning and not to tell anyone that she'd come. After all, he wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea and his or her name be slandered. Furthermore, Ruth decided to leave before morning so that she wouldn't be recognized—no doubt motivated by the same thing. But before she left, he gave six measures of barley and sent her back to Naomi. And when she arrived and Ruth told Naomi everything, showing her the barley, Naomi obviously takes this as Boaz's pledge that he will indeed act as the redeemer and marry Ruth if possible, and so she tells Ruth, "Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today" (3:18). And so we wait to hear how the matter will turn out as Boaz goes to approach this other man who is actually more closely related to Elimelech.

But aren't we overwhelmed in this story at the gracious providence of God, even toward a woman who was bitter against him and blaming him in chapter 1? Aren't we moved by the faithful and selfless obedience of someone like Ruth? Aren't we challenged by the trust that Naomi and Ruth show toward their God?

I mentioned last week that one of the benefits of story is that it allows us to diagnose issues in characters in the story more easily than we can diagnose them ourselves. Consequently, looking at the sin of those involved in chapter 1 last week helped us to accurately look at sin in our own lives and see how it affects us. But there is also a danger with stories, like we find here in the book of Ruth. The danger is that we cheer on Ruth and Naomi to keep trusting in God and acting in obedience to him, but we somehow feel like we're in a completely different setting than them. After all, they're characters in the Bible, and we are, well, you and me, living in this world in 2019. But to think that way is to make a mistake. And the reason it's a mistake is because the main actor in the book of Ruth is our faithful God. He is the one graciously moving all things so that Ruth happens to arrive in Boaz's field, that Boaz happens to be who he is, and that Boaz happens to respond as he does. He is the one who is worthy of Naomi and Ruth's trust and obedience. And that same gracious, powerful God who exercises meticulous providence in his world, is our God, still doing those very same things.

So, I know it's tempting to think that God is not accounting for your circumstances or the difficulties you're in, but can you still think that after seeing who he is in Ruth 2-3? Therefore, trust him, and keep obeying him, believing that he is not limited in any way from working all things for your good—which he has promised. After all, this story is very much for us. It might

seem like it's about how God blesses Naomi and Ruth, but that's actually only part of the story. And I say that because Ruth and Naomi died before one from their line would be born in a manger in Bethlehem, live a perfect life, die on the cross, and rise from the dead. But we know that that's where this story ultimately goes. And that happened because our God wanted to save us—you and me. Ruth is about the end to which God went to make sure that you and I—and all of his children—might be saved. Therefore, let's continue to trust him in our difficult circumstances, obey him when things can seem hopeless, and believe that our gracious, powerful, faithful God is working the details of our lives to bring about every purpose he has for us. How could we think otherwise when we see what he's already done for us in Christ? So let us now come to the table and give him thanks. Amen.