

Gleaning God's Provision...God Provides
Ruth 2 & 3 (selections)
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Last week we began to read this marvelous story of how God's people endured the loss of loved ones and a bleak economic future. And no matter how much culture changes; no matter much more we are protected by the social net that should catch us if we lose a job, if our business folds, or if we're impaired with a stroke...this Great Recession reminds us that there is no ultimate security, other than being "secure in our Father's hands."

After Naomi and Ruth became widows, God used their spiritual friendship to heal their grief and help them face their fears, while preparing them for taking on the challenge of survival. And God used their struggle to bless the world—God always uses our growth to bless others.

Let's resume our reading at the beginning of chapter 2; this comes after we are told that Naomi and Ruth have returned to Bethlehem from Moab, with Naomi telling her kin "don't call me Naomi, call me Mara, because my life has been bitter."

¹ Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz. ² And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." ³ So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters.

Before we read further, let's pause and recognize the provision that God makes for His people as spiritual friendship enables them to heal and take the next steps forward.

As your God-given spiritual friendship helps you recover from the grief of your hardship, God will enable you to take initiative, as Ruth did. Though a foreigner, with natural anxieties about possible mistreatment, verse 2 says that *Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor."* No matter how much you've suffered, no matter how many bad breaks you've had, God's answer will involve getting you to take initiative in getting your provision, even when it's humiliating, or exhausting, or scary. As we will see, the Lord surprises us with favor we couldn't have imagined, if we take the initiative to trust him.

These first verses of chapter 2 also remind us how important it is for you to look for your Naomi, your spiritual friend who will be an important sounding board. Naomi was Jewish; she understood the culture that was foreign to Ruth. When it occurred to Ruth to go out and glean in the barley fields, it was important to hear Naomi say, *"Go ahead, my daughter."* In this story, Naomi's counsel will be crucial for Ruth to glean food and security for both of them. And when you face challenge, getting counsel from someone who is wise and spiritually-centered can make all the difference. .

As we read the rest of verse 3, we see that the most important element is to trust in God. *As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.* Circle "as it turned out," in your Bible or write this phrase on your notepage. Ruth didn't know that she was going into Boaz's fields; in the providence of God it "turned out" that way. All the things that transpire afterwards are possibilities because it just "turned out" that when Ruth took initiative, she ended up in the fields of a very kind man who was a relative of her dead husband.

We can trust in the God who provides opportune coincidences in our lives. When we put our difficulties before the Lord in prayer, seeking his guidance, and when we get a leading, a sense in our spirit that we should take a certain initiative, when we get the confirmation of the wise Naomi person God has put into our lives, opportune coincidences seem to happen with frequency.

As an example, let me share that last fall I was very apprehensive as to whether Trinity should continue to offer its purpose-driven ministry conference. I've always felt like we shouldn't go to all this trouble if we don't have fresh insight that will strengthen the churches whose leaders come to the conference. After having Reggie McNeal in a class in California last summer, I sensed God leading me to ask him to be our key speaker. Knowing he was extremely popular and hard to book, I prayed about it, I went over to him, and I made the ask. Reggie said, "I'm pretty much booked up for 2010, when would you want me?" Taking a deep breath I said, "April 21, 2010." He said, "The Lord has smiled on you my brother; I am finishing up, my commitment to the Exponential Conference in Orlando at 1:00 on April 21! Tell you what, since I'm right there I'll speak for half of my normal fee!" Folks, that's the kind of coincidence that happens far more when you're praying!

Now let's read chapter 2, up to verse 16:

⁴ *Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!"*

"The LORD bless you!" they called back.

⁵ *Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?"*

⁶ *The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. ⁷ She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."*

⁸ *So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. ⁹ Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled."*

¹⁰ *At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?"*

¹¹ *Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. ¹² May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."*

¹³ *"May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls."*

¹⁴ *At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar."*

When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. ¹⁵ As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men,

"Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. ¹⁶ Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her."

These ten verses give us a distinct portrait of how God's people are to be a gracious community for those struggling with hardship. Though it emerged 3500 years ago, the Law of Moses went to great length to protect the poor from starvation. Landowners were not allowed to take all the grain from their land. Instead of sending the pickers through repeatedly, Jewish landowners were commanded by the Law to leave grain out in the field, so that the poor who would take the initiative could glean their provision. And this protection wasn't just for the Jews; God's people were also commanded to be gracious to sojourners in their midst. As long as the foreigners worked hard and honored their laws, they were not considered illegal aliens. They were welcome to work hard, and invited to worship the true God. The attitude was summed up in verse 12: *May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.*" Ruth represents many outsiders who were brought into Judaism.

That's why the church of Jesus Christ welcomes outsiders into its fellowship. It's why we strive to be generous to others, before they belong to us, with the hope that maybe our graciousness will help them trust in the grace of Jesus Christ. It's why we're continually seeking to wrap an arm around single parents and fatherless children.

In the remainder of chapter 2, Ruth takes her hard-earned grain back to Naomi and tells her the wonderful ways that Boaz treated her. Things were really looking up for the two of them. Then in chapter 3, we see how God provides not only spiritual friends, but also candid coaches:

¹ One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? ² Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³ Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

⁵ "I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. ⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

⁷ When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸ In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet.

⁹ "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer."

¹⁰ "The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. ¹² Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. ¹³ Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning."

Sounds a little like that Four Seasons song, “O What a Night!” But Bible scholars debate exactly what happened that night. What is clear is that Naomi and Ruth decided that Boaz would be a kind husband who could provide security to them both. Under Jewish Law, Boaz had an obligation to claim Ruth as his wife, if Ruth could find a way to convince him to pursue the obligation, without seeming like a hussy.

So Ruth got all “dollied up” and Naomi shrewdly advised her on how to approach Boaz in secret, when he was happy, full of food and drink. As he lay down, Ruth “uncovered his feet and lay down.” This is a disputed text. Some commentators point out that this phrase can mean that she uncovered his...lower torso (I’m not making this up). Others say “no way,” Ruth was curling up at his feet in an act of submission, asking him privately to take her as his wife. Professor John Stek, Ruth Paauwe’s father, was an expert on the Book of Ruth and he took the latter view. When I asked John about it years ago, he said, “Ruth was brazen, but not that brazen!”

Boaz clearly acted like a gentleman. Since he was older, he was honored that she would choose him for her husband, and as we shall see next week, Boaz first sought to make sure that no one else had the right to take Ruth as his wife.

What we see in this story is that there’s nothing unspiritual about getting candid coaching about how to get a husband, get a job, or succeed in a business. There’s no separation between the spiritual and the material, God wants to give us direction in how to have the best possible life on earth, so he gives us candid coaches. When the advice is wanted, we should help each other understand how to succeed in relationships, in school, and in our work lives.

I’m aware of some wonderful one-on-one mentoring relationships where one of Trinity’s members has met with someone regularly to give them support and advice. One of Trinity’s neat ministries is a life group where a trained career development consultant coaches unemployed persons in how to prepare for that job interview when God provides an opportune coincidence. More than a few attribute their new job to their God-given, candid coaching.

I want to close by telling you about Richard. He was a police officer who was a member of a former congregation; unbeknownst to everyone he was addicted to pain-killing drugs because of a back injury. One day he was arrested for shop-lifting pharmaceuticals while in uniform. I went to visit him at a recovery center. He was ashamed, but willing to do what it takes to rebuild his life and provide for his family, and so he asked me to be a spiritual mentor.

I gave Richard candid coaching. He welcomed the advice, and took a job mopping floors at a fast food restaurant. Eventually he became a manager of that restaurant. Several years ago he sent a photo of his family getting on a Royal Caribbean ship. He said “I thought of you being nearby.” What a privilege to be used by God to mentor someone! Brothers and sisters, God can make you into a candid coach—God’s provision for someone who’s struggling.

And if you’re struggling...take the initiative, find your Naomi, pray expecting opportune coincidences, invest yourself in gracious community, and welcome candid coaching. Whatever you’re facing, God wants to provide for you! Go and glean God’s provision!