

## Ruth 2:1-20 – The Providence of God

### Reading – Ruth 2:1-13

There but for the grace of God. Well, that's an expression that we may often hear, sometimes said rather glibly as just a turn of phrase may be. But in reality, there but for the grace of God go all of us.

I'm sure we can all recall times when if we'd just been somewhere a couple of minutes earlier or later, or if we'd decided to go one place instead of another, then something horrible may have happened to us. What we often see as a coincidence is really, and if we Christians, we know, to be a saving action of God's grace or providence upon our lives. And as we've learned in recent weeks during our talks around the book of Genesis, we know, don't we, that God will always be working in the background to bring all things together for good. Sometimes these episodes are short one-off events where we can see that we have been protected from something. But realistically I know that there are times when we will all feel unprotected and even that God just isn't there for us and it is only in retrospect – sometimes years later - and a good look back at unfolding events that we see where God has been working his purposes out for good all along.

There are many examples I could give you from my own life and I'm sure you've got many yourselves but a recent example that I'd like to share with you is that a couple of weeks ago my daughter's boyfriend Stuart and a work colleague were to drive in the same car to an address in London to collect another car which would then be driven back to Melton by Stuart's colleague. The day went well until just after the car was collected and they both left to make their own journeys back. Now, Stuart's satnav prompted him to make a wrong turn, but he soon saw the mistake and corrected his route and got back onto the right road. Only to find that his colleague had been involved in a road traffic accident where a van had driven into the side of him, causing his car to spin and crash into a third vehicle. Thankfully, no-one was severely injured, but the vehicles were quite badly damaged. Stuart was able then to stop and take control of the situation by calming the three rather irate and shocked drivers down and by taking photos and details that would be needed for inevitable insurance claims. When Stuart told me this story, my first words were "there but for the grace of God". Of course, what I meant was that first of all if he hadn't been wrongly directed it could so easily have been him involved in an accident with the potential for serious injury and that it was a

relief that the people involved hadn't been hurt but also because he wasn't involved, he was a few minutes later at the scene and was therefore able to care for his colleague and look at the whole situation objectively and make the necessary calls etc. Do you remember when we looked at the life of Joseph a couple of weeks ago, we saw the same thing, where twists and turns in Joseph's life could have meant for a lot of people that there couldn't possibly be a God if all these terrible things could happen to just one person, but as we saw, Joseph's faith in God made him come to realise, just as we must come to realise, that God was in control the whole time and that in the end all things were worked out for good.

Chapter 2 of the Book of Ruth is a great example of God's grace or providence as we'll see as we start to unpack the unfolding story of Ruth meeting Boaz.

We are introduced to Boaz in the first verse of Chapter 2 and are told that he was a relative of Naomi's husband, Elimelech and that he was a worthy man. Ruth asks Naomi to allow her to go out and glean in the fields of one in whose sight she would find favour. And Naomi says yes "go my daughter". We need to note two things here. Firstly, gleaning was the practice of gathering up the left-over crops of a harvest. The law at the time stated that a strip of land around the edges of the fields must not be harvested by the landowner's slaves but be left so that the poorer people could gather or glean the spare crops for themselves. The second thing to note from this verse is that Ruth was actually taking a risk in going out into the fields not knowing who they belonged to because remember she was not from Bethlehem but from Moab and was therefore not a fellow Israelite but a "foreigner" and could easily have run into difficulties. But she was prepared to take those risks for the sake of her mother-in-law Naomi's and her own survival.

Verse 3 tells us that Ruth "happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz" and in verse 4 that Boaz returned to Bethlehem. Two coincidences there then aren't there – Ruth just happened to end up in a field belonging to Boaz and Boaz himself just happened to return to Bethlehem at the same time. This is on top of the timing of Naomi and Ruth's return to Bethlehem which just happened to be at the start of the harvest. But of course, we don't see these things as coincidences, do we? Rather we see through our lens of the rest of scripture and especially the teachings of the New Testament, that it is God working in the background to bring about the outcome that is His will. Remember Joseph being placed in the right place at the right time after much

hardship? Well now we see Ruth, having been faced with famine and poverty and real worry for the future of her mother-in-law and herself, being placed where things will improve her situation. We should also note that when Boaz returned to his land, he greeted his servants with the words “The Lord be with you” and they replied “The Lord bless you” which confirms to us that they are God fearing people and makes Ruth’s welcome, as a Moabite woman, even more surprising.

Boaz asks who Ruth is and his servants explain that Naomi has returned, and that Ruth is her daughter-in-law. Boaz not only agrees that Ruth can glean in his fields, but he also protects her by telling her to work only in his fields, to stick with the female workers and he warns the male workers not to touch her. He adds that when she is thirsty, she must break for a drink. Another fact that makes it so surprising that Boaz is obviously of such good character is that this is all happening during the time of the Judges, when people showing grace and mercy were pretty scarce!

Ruth herself cannot believe her good fortune and in verse 10 says to Boaz “Why have I found favour in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” to which Boaz replies “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”.

So, at the very beginning of this chapter, we see Ruth saying to Naomi that she wants to go out and glean in the fields of one in whose sight she would find favour and now in verse 13 she says to Boaz “I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants”.

As if we haven’t been surprised enough by the goodness of Boaz towards Ruth and Naomi, we hear more! Further on in Chapter 2, Boaz now invites Ruth to eat and drink with him and the other workers and, wait for it .... Boaz serves Ruth himself!! She eats all she can and has food to spare. Boaz then goes on in verse 15 to say to his servants “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” and in verse 17 we are told that Ruth returns home to Naomi with an ephah of barley. To put this into perspective, an ephah equates to approximately 30 to 50 lbs of grain and this is

in addition to the leftover food from the meal – Ruth and Naomi are not going to starve! In fact, as there was left over food and more barley than the two women could possibly eat, they would probably have been able to sell some of the produce and so Boaz has also provided them with a livelihood.

It is only after Ruth returns home to Naomi that Naomi questions her as to where she has worked and whose fields she has gleaned and Ruth tells her she has been working with Boaz to which Naomi replies by telling Ruth in verse 20 that Boaz is in fact a “close relative of ours, one of our redeemers”.

Are you reminded of anything in this passage? Let’s look back at and summarise what we’ve seen so far in this chapter – Ruth, a Moabite has arrived in Bethlehem, penniless, starving, widowed and it’s not long until her fortunes are reversed when she just happens to arrive at the fields belonging to Boaz where she is made very welcome and is provided for, protected by, cared for by Boaz himself. I am seeing a real example here of the greater serving the lesser, aren’t you? Remember when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples? Also, when Boaz welcomes Ruth to his table we must surely see a resemblance to another event where a table, a meal and a redeemer were present? Of course, I am referring to the actions of our own Lord, Jesus Christ, who, we are told in Mark 10:45 “came not to be served but to serve” and who of course invited his disciples to eat and drink with him at that last supper where he revealed himself to be their Redeemer.

This second chapter of the Book of Ruth gives us a real sense of God’s grace or providence doesn’t it? And you know if we as Christians today realise that the ups and downs in our own lives are not just chances of fate or coincidences but the result of God working his purposes out in the background and by his grace, mercy, love, and providence leading us along our own paths, we must agree with the following quote “God’s providence means there is no good reason to despair”. The author of this quote goes on to explain that of course there are times when we will be sad, will grieve and will cry out to God in lament, but we should never despair if we trust and have faith in all that God has done for us, especially at the cross through his son, our saviour, Jesus Christ. Rather we can, as the earlier quote continues “rest in the orchestrated control of God”. Isn’t that a comforting truth?

Ephesians 1:11 tells us “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” and so next time something happens where we are saved from a crisis, let’s not think well that was lucky but rather, there but for the grace of God and when life is hard and we feel defeated, let’s remember to cry out to God in prayer and ask that his will is revealed to us and remember that through difficulty and suffering, as in the life of Jesus, he is working his purposes out, as a loving father, for our good. Thanks be to God.

Amen