

This morning we continue hearing the Word of God from the book of Ruth. Like he does in much of the Bible, God speaks to us here through a story. Be sure of this: God is speaking to us through the story that we will be thinking about in this sermon. God is teaching us about himself in this story. He is teaching us about his plan of salvation. He is teaching us concepts that help us to understand Jesus and his saving ministry. And he is giving us an example of how he cares for his people and how he wants us to live for his glory.

So this morning we will consider the part of the story told in the book of Ruth where Ruth goes into the fields to glean, where she meets Boaz, where Boaz treats her with remarkable kindness and where she comes home with more grain than anyone could have expected and where Naomi begins to see in all these events that the LORD has not forsaken her after all. But the main thing that we are meant to see is that behind all these events God is at work directing all things toward a gracious end for Naomi, for Ruth, for Boaz, for Israel and for the Church. This is one of the most wonderful things about this story and many others like it. God is the main character even though he is mostly invisible in the story. And that is the case in our individual stories as well. God is the main actor in each of our stories even though we know that by faith and not by sight.

The first verse is very interesting. “Now Naomi had a relative of her husband’s a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.” This verse is so interesting because it is not part of the story and is not connected directly to the verses that follow it. We are going to meet Boaz in a few verses, and he is going to figure prominently in the story, but before we actually encounter him in the story, the author wants us to know that he exists – that there was a close relative of Naomi’s husband in the vicinity whose name was Boaz who was a worthy man. Boaz does not appear to have been on Naomi’s mind. Nothing in the story so far suggests that Naomi had any expectations of help from her relatives. All that the story has shown us so far about Naomi was her hopelessness.

Verse 1 of chapter 2 is addressed to us the readers. We are told something that neither Naomi nor Ruth are thinking about. We are given a glimmer of hope that Naomi and Ruth do not yet have. The author of the story introduces us to someone who is going to be God’s means of blessing Naomi and Ruth. We are given a hint of where God is directing the story, but Naomi and Ruth do not yet know about Boaz.

And this perspective reflects the way that God looks down upon our lives. He knows every detail of our future. He sees where we are now. He sees what will happen to us during the day and what our life situation will look like at the end of the day. But we do not see that. We are like Naomi and Ruth in that we do not know what the day will bring. But the author of our story does. And he has revealed himself to us as our God who works everything together for our good.

So, Ruth decides that she will go out into the fields to gather some grain. Verse 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.’” We do not know why Naomi and Ruth do not go together. Ruth is being held up in a positive light in taking the

initiative to go and gather food for her and Naomi to eat. There is no thought at this point of looking for any particular field. Ruth will look for a field of someone who will be kind enough to let her glean there.

The background here is God's law concerning one of the ways the poor were to be cared for among his people. The farmers were not to strip their fields completely bare when they harvested. They were to leave some of the crops behind so that the poor could gather what was left behind. Deuteronomy 24:19–22, ¹⁹“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. ²⁰When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²¹When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²²You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.”

This was a very healthy and wholesome way of caring for the poor and needy. Their needs were provided for but in a way that they had to work to meet their needs. It is so much more healthy for people in need to have opportunities to work for their needs rather than surviving on handouts. There are situations where handouts are the only way, such as disaster relief or in the case of disability, but Christian relief agencies have come to see that providing people opportunities to work is the best way for truly helping people who are in need. And that is based on biblical principles such as the gleaning laws of the OT.

So, Ruth is going to find a field owned by a farmer who abides by God's law and will allow her to go through his fields after the harvesters had done their work. She hoped to find a field where she could gather the grain the harvesters left behind so that she and her mother-in-law might have enough to eat. There is no hint yet of looking for the field of a relative. The story does not tell us why they did not seek help from Naomi's relatives. It just makes it clear that Ruth was hoping to find a farmer who would allow her to find what she could in his harvested fields.

Verse 3 describes what happened next. “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.” “[S]he happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz....” This is irony. The author means the exact opposite of what he says here and by putting it this way, he makes the point much more powerfully than if he just came out and said what he meant to say. One of the major points of the whole book of Ruth is that nothing just happens.

One of the major points of this whole story is that God was directing all the events from the beginning to the end. There is no such thing as chance in the biblical worldview. The biblical worldview is expressed in an unmistakable way in Proverbs 16:33 “The lot of cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” The closest thing that we have to a lot being cast into a lap is the flipping of a coin. Heads or Tails. Totally random from our human perspective. But not from God's perspective. Whether the coin comes up heads or tails is

from the Lord. He totally controls whether the coin comes up heads or tails. Nothing just happens. Every seemingly random thing is under God's control.

And so, when our author says that Ruth just happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, what he is really saying is that what appeared to just happen by chance was really God directing Ruth to that field. Ruth was just trying to find a field where the farmer would let her look for leftovers. From her perspective she just happened to end up in Boaz' field. But the author is making the point in a powerful way that what seemed to be chance to Ruth was actually God directing her steps to that particular field.

This is a very important point for our lives. Nothing happens by chance. Nothing just happens. Every single detail of our days is controlled by God. God is able to do this in such a way that we make real decisions and are responsible for our actions. But in the end every single thing that happens in our lives is the result of God's direction over our lives and over all things. That means that how we respond to the circumstances of our lives is always a response to God. We are always responding to God's sovereign control of everything that happens in our lives.

The book of Ruth is powerfully making the point that God directs the course of our lives. Ruth did not just happen to find herself in Boaz' field. She ended up in Boaz' field because God saw to it that she ended up in Boaz' field. She made her own decisions along the way. God did not manipulate her like a puppet. But in a way that only he can do because he is God, he brought her to Boaz' field through her own decisions that brought her there. From Ruth's perception of things she just happened to end up in Boaz' field. But the author of this story is telling us that God directed her steps so that they brought her to Boaz' field.

The author makes sure that we know that Boaz was a relative of Naomi through her husband. Verse 1 describes him as "a relative of her husband's ... of the clan of Elimelech." Verse 3 repeats that. One of the most significant things about Boaz was that he "was of the clan of Elimelech." This immediately raises our hope that Boaz might be more likely to help Ruth and Naomi than some random farmer.

The fact that Boaz is a relative will become much more important as the story proceeds, but at this point we see that God has led Ruth to a field of a relative which shows us how God is at work to provide for Naomi and Ruth.

But Boaz is not just a relative. He is a godly man. The story makes much of Boaz' character. Verse 1 refers to him as a worthy man. And the rest of the story demonstrates that fact. In verse 4 we meet Boaz. "And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, 'The LORD be with you!' And they answered, 'The LORD bless you.'" This interchange with his workers demonstrates Boaz' piety, but also his good rapport with his workers. The author is demonstrating for us that Boaz is a worthy man. He treats his workers well.

In the next few verses, Boaz asks about the young woman working in his field and he is told that she is the "young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi." Boaz is told that she has asked to gather grain in the

field after the reapers and he is told that she is a diligent worker. The text says, “[S]he has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest.”

The first thing that this shows us is that Boaz’ workers were following God’s laws that mandated farmers to allow the poor to glean on their land after the harvesters had done their work. And this no doubt was because Boaz had instructed them to do so. We know from the rest of the OT that the people of Israel did not always follow God’s laws. We know from the historical context of this story, set as it is in the time of the judges, that these were not times of great faithfulness in Israel. Remember that during the time of the judges most people were doing what was right in their own eyes. We know from the rest of the OT that Israel was often condemned by God for neglecting the poor. And we know from general history and our own hearts that human beings in general are not very good at taking care of the poor. And so it is significant that we see Boaz and his workers following God’s law concerning the poor by allowing Ruth glean in Boaz’ fields.

Next, we see Boaz going above and beyond what God’s law required. He calls Ruth his daughter which, at the very least, is a term of warmth and acceptance. Remember it is very important for the story that Ruth is a Moabite. There is the connection to Naomi, but it is very significant that Boaz does not give her the cold shoulder because she is a Moabite. The author of the story is holding that up for us as a good thing. It is a reflection of Boaz being a worthy man.

He goes above and beyond by telling Ruth to stay in his field, to keep close to his female servants. He assures her that he has instructed his male workers not to touch her. She is not to be sexually harassed. And she is invited to drink of the water that his servants would provide for their fellow workers. Then when it was time for lunch he invited Ruth to share the meal that he provided for his workers and he served her himself. We are told that she ate until she was full and had leftovers. Remember that Naomi and Ruth were worried about survival. So it is significant that Ruth is able to eat until she is full and had food to save for later. When lunch was over and Ruth went back to her work, Boaz instructed his workers to leave extra grain behind so that it would be easier for Ruth to gather the grain that she and Naomi needed.

All of this fills out the description of Boaz given in verse 1 that Boaz was a worthy man. He is being described in a very positive light. We’ll come back to the significance of that a little later on.

Verses 10-13 relate a conversation between Ruth and Boaz and the point of the conversation is to highlight both Ruth’s good character as well as further emphasize Boaz’ kindness. Ruth asks Boaz why he is being so kind to her since she is a foreigner. She is very aware of the fact that she is an outsider. Her expectation is that as an outsider she will not be treated well. So the kindness shown her by Boaz is surprising to her.

Boaz’ reply serves to highlight Ruth’s good character. Verses 11-12, “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. 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.!”

Ruth has shown that she too was a worthy person by standing by her mother-in-law. Boaz understands that Ruth has made a significant sacrifice to do that. He acknowledges that she has sought refuge under wings of the God of Israel. And he expresses his hope that the LORD will repay her for what she has done.

So, both Ruth and Boaz are held up before us as examples of faithfulness, kindness, and going beyond what would normally be expected of them. If we think about how this story would have been understood by the people of Israel for whose benefit it was first preserved and written down, surely at least part of the purpose was to give examples of how God wants his people to live. And of course, the book means the same thing to us as well.

The teaching of the Bible about how we should treat people and live our lives is very profound. There is a lot in the Bible about how people should treat one another. There is also a lot in the Bible about the fact that the only way we can even begin to live as God would have us live is through God's enabling grace in our lives. The whole picture is much more profound than God giving examples in his word of how to treat other people. But giving us good examples is part of the picture and that is at least part of what is going on here. We should be faithful and loyal and hardworking like Ruth was. And we should be kind and caring and accepting of outsiders as Boaz was. We should care for the poor like he did. We should help family members in need as he did.

The notion of reward is also significant here. Boaz expresses his hope that the LORD will reward Ruth for her loyalty and kindness to her mother-in-law. We may hesitate about the idea of reward because there is such an emphasis in the Bible on the fact that salvation is by grace and not by works. And yet the Bible does speak about rewards. Psalm 58:11 says, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges the earth." This does not mean that anyone deserves God's favor in an absolute sense, but it does mean that God does bless his people when they walk in his ways. But at the same time sometimes the righteous suffer and so the reward is not always obvious. It becomes more clear in the NT that we must think of all this in the light of eternal rewards. But nevertheless, there are many, many instances where there is a clear relationship between keeping God's laws and rewards. And the way that God is treating Ruth in this story is an example of that. Proverbs 13:21 says, "Disaster pursues sinners, but the righteous are rewarded with good."

The takeaway from this we are always much better off if we keep God's commandments. In many cases living righteous and holy lives leads to this-worldly blessings because that is how God designed the world to work. But that does not mean that the righteous will never suffer. The Bible makes it clear that the righteous do suffer. But the general principle is still that God does reward his people when they live as he tells them to live. And examples like Ruth and Boaz in this passage are part of the way that we are inspired to live lives that reflect God's will.

The last part of the passage describes what happens when Ruth goes home at the end of the day. She has been able to glean about an ephah of barley. That is a lot. Much more than she would have been able to gather had Boaz not make it easier for her. Naomi's reaction is a very significant part of the story. Verses 20 "And Naomi said to her daughter in law, 'May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!' Naomi also said, "The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers." The idea of Boaz as one of their redeemers is important for the rest of the story. We will not deal with it now, but wait until it comes up again later in the book.

For now we will reflect on the first thing that Naomi says, "May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Here we see Naomi begin to change in her conception of God. Remember how earlier she had been bitter against God and was convinced that God was against her. In the light of the events recorded in chapter 2, Naomi begins to see that God has not forsaken her after all. It is not clear from the text whether Naomi is talking about Boaz' kindness or the Lord's kindness, but probably she means both. The Lord has shown his kindness through Boaz' kindness to Ruth.

The word "kindness" is a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*. It is a word that is often used of God. Often it is translated as steadfast love. This is a very important idea in the book of Ruth. And both Ruth and Boaz are human examples embodying *hesed*. There is the idea of loyalty and faithfulness combined with kindness that exceeds expectations. Both Boaz and Ruth demonstrate *hesed* and their doing so is an important part of the story.

But it is especially important because they are reflecting God's *hesed*. Indeed, God is showing his *hesed* to Naomi through the *hesed* of Ruth and the *hesed* of Boaz. Ruth and Boaz show us what God's *hesed* looks like. And Naomi is beginning to realize that through Ruth's faithfulness and Boaz' kindness God has not forsaken her and was showing her *hesed*, kindness, steadfast love.

A main purpose of this story is to teach us about God's steadfast love for his weak and sinful people. Naomi had left the promised land with her husband and sons to seek prosperity at the expense of their relationship with God. When Naomi lost her husband and her sons, she did not turn to the Lord in her agony, she turned away from him in her bitterness. But through it all God was directing her life for her physical and spiritual wellbeing. And what begins to open her eyes to God's steadfast love for her is the steadfast love of Boaz and Ruth.

This theme of steadfast love leads to Jesus Christ. For this story is not only about Naomi and Ruth and Boaz. It is also about how God was directing their lives so that Ruth and Boaz would be ancestors of king David who would be the ancestor of Jesus. The ultimate expression of *hesed* is Jesus. It is ultimately through Jesus paying the penalty for our sin that God shows his steadfast love to us.

In this story we see how God was working to bring blessing to Naomi. She is not in a good place spiritually in the first part of the story. But God is working the events of her life to bring her blessing. He could treat her in this way and not give her what she deserved because he knew that one day Jesus would come and pay the penalty for all her sins. We have a much clearer understanding of how God can be gracious to a sinful people because we know about Jesus and all that he has done for us.

And so, let us understand our lives in the light of this story. Let us be aware of how God works directing our lives to bless us. Let us be aware of his steadfast love to people who do not deserve it. And us be inspired by the example of Ruth and Boaz so that we can be people through whom God expresses his steadfast love to others.