

## **“As Luck Would Have It”**

**Ruth 2:1-3**

**October 5, 2014**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

This morning’s sermon title is taken from a translation of verse 3 suggested by the Old Testament scholar Robert Hubbard. *“As luck would have it, she happened upon the piece of farmland belonging to Boaz.”* I imagine the author with a smile on his face as he writes these words, because there is no place for luck in his view of God. He believes instead in the absolute control of Israel’s God over every detail of life, no matter how small. The word we use for that today is the providence of God. As we read earlier in the service, when we speak of God’s providence, we are referring to the power of God by which he governs all things in the world, so that “all things come, not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.”

I detect a bit of a playful attitude in the author in these early verses of chapter 2, not only in his tongue-in-cheek remark about luck, but also in his introduction of Boaz in verse 1. He increases suspense by introducing Boaz to the readers before he actually makes his appearance in the story itself. Verse 1 is unnecessary to the development of the plot. The author introduces him now to suggest that he will play a major part in this story. Two things are said about him here. First, he is a member of Elimelech’s clan. The clan was the unit between the larger tribe and one’s immediate family. Second, he is a “worthy” man. That adjective actually translates two Hebrew words that usually refer to a war hero. That’s probably not what it means here, but simply means that he is a powerful and influential man, highly respected throughout Bethlehem. He is both powerful and good, in contrast to the first three men in Naomi’s life, who were weak and not so good.

The author can be playful because he believes in the providence of God, and he knows how this story turns out in God’s goodness. Knowing and believing in the providence of a good God has great power to give us hope. Let’s see how this is worked out in today’s passage.

### **I. The Pattern of God’s Providence**

The playful attitude exhibited by the author in these early verses of chapter 2 contrasts sharply with what Naomi and Ruth were feeling. The circumstances of their lives reached a new low. They had just completed their journey from Moab back to Bethlehem, and all such major journeys have an element of challenge and stimulation. But they have now arrived, and the challenge and stimulation of the journey gives way to the hard realities and routines of life.

They are poor, with no men in their lives to help them. Their economic plight could not have been more dire. And it seems that Naomi is suffering from some kind of depression. I notice in verse 2 that it is Ruth who takes action to go out reaping. Why not Naomi? A woman who could walk from Moab to Bethlehem would be strong enough to glean. The brevity of her words to Ruth gives a further indication that she is likely battling depression. When you're depressed, taking action of any kind becomes a major undertaking. Depression also tends to isolate you from others as you lose your desire to engage with people. Naomi seems to be exhibiting some of these symptoms.

The narrator, on the other hand, is practically dancing a jig. Why? Because he knows the pattern of God's providence and the precise way it works itself out in this story. The pattern of God's providence is the hockey stick, not the circle. Think about the shape of the hockey stick as it is held by a player. Beginning at the end that strikes the puck, it runs down to the ice, but then turns upward toward his body. The providence of God works similarly, running at first toward death and misery, but then turning to resurrection and joyful new life. The narrator knows that we are at the turn of the stick, and he simply can't help but dropping hints at the good that is about to break forth upon Ruth and Naomi. He reminds me of the child who has bought what he considers the perfect gift for his mother's birthday, and now he can't wait to give it to her. He's so excited that he can't help but let out a few hints before the day comes when he can present her with the gift.

The Christian pattern of life is the hockey stick, not the circle. In his book, *A Loving Life*, Paul Miller makes the point that the pagan view of life is circular. People noticed how the patterns of days, months and seasons were repetitive, and they concluded that life itself was circular. You are born, you live, and then you die. Along the way, you may bring forth new life in the form of children, but all that does is allow the circular pattern to continue. Homer's *Iliad* begins with Odysseus leaving home and the *Odyssey* ends with his return home. The Christian view of life, by contrast, may start in a downward direction of suffering and death, but it ends in resurrection. This is the good news of the gospel. We are not trapped in an inescapable circular pattern. Both the history of the world and our own personal history are going somewhere. God has invaded this world through his son, Jesus, and he is about the business of restoring this broken world to the place of peace and beauty he has always had in mind for it.

Paul Miller points out how a gospel story is a story with this theme of death and resurrection, what we are calling the hockey stick pattern. Such stories resonate powerfully within the human heart and draw us in. He says that if you want to author a bestselling book or movie script, you would do well to make it a gospel story. When the movie *Troy* came out, he predicted that it would flop because it isn't a gospel story. It's a Greek tragedy. Contrast that

with *Les Miserables*, a classic gospel story of death and resurrection. Whether as a book, a Broadway musical or a dramatic movie, it's a hit.

The Bible itself teaches that the Old Testament is full of pictures of Jesus (Luke 24:27). We saw last week how Ruth is a picture of Christ in her unselfish love for Naomi. Despite her own significant suffering, she determines to love her mother-in-law no matter what cost she must pay to do so. Where do we see Jesus in this passage? We can see him again in Ruth's continuing love for Naomi, seen in her action to provide food for herself and Naomi through gleaning. We're going to look at that in our next point. But I believe there's another picture of Jesus in the joyful attitude of the narrator as he excitedly unfolds the resurrection part of the gospel story. Jesus is a super narrator. The narrator of Ruth is simply reporting on events that are in his past, while being in the present of the characters themselves. To Jesus, what is future to us is as clear to him as something that happened in the past. That's because Jesus is not just recording what has happened, but is the one who brings these things about. And like this narrator, he is full of joy because he knows what's coming for each of us. It is written of Jesus in the book of Hebrews that he endured the cross because **"of the joy that was set before him"** (12:2). Jesus knows how the story ends because he is the Lamb who sits on the throne and who brings about the desired end. It is the joy of his renewed fellowship with the Father, and the joy of his renewed fellowship with his children, unbroken by sin. Jesus was willing to endure the greatest suffering ever endured by any human, the breaking of his eternal fellowship with his Father while he was on the cross, for the joy he knew was coming. It is the joy of fellowship with us.

Let me mention an application before moving to our next point. This truth of the hockey stick pattern of God's providence gives us incredible power to endure with hope, no matter how great our present suffering. You may be at the same place as Ruth and Naomi at this point of the story, at the bottom of the hockey stick. There is a grand narrator with a smile on his face, the Lamb who sits on the throne. He is smiling because he knows that resurrection lies in your future. Remember too that he is not only smiling, but, paradoxically, he is also weeping with those who weep as they head toward the bottom of the hockey stick. In the book I mentioned earlier, Paul Miller mentions four things he's learned about the pattern of death and resurrection in the believer's life, what I am calling the hockey stick pattern of God's providence.

1. We don't know how or when resurrection will come. It is God's work, not ours.
2. We don't even know what resurrection will look like. We can't demand the shape or timing of a resurrection.
3. Like Jesus, we must embrace the death that the Father has put in front of us. The path to resurrection is through dying, not fighting.
4. If we endure, resurrection always comes. God is alive! (p. 70)

I might add that even though we don't know what resurrection will look like, it will be as the case was with Ruth and Naomi, better and more glorious than imagined.

## **II. The Response to God's Providence**

While Naomi seems stuck in inaction by her depression, Ruth realizes that something must be done. There is no time to waste. It is harvesting season for the barley crop, which would have made this late April or early May, and such a harvest would have lasted only a few days. One of Israel's provisions for the poor was in the practice of gleaning. God's law required that harvesters be deliberately inefficient, leaving the corners of their fields unharvested, as well as not bothering to pick up any stalks that had escaped to the ground. The normal manner of harvesting grain crops such as barley would be to grab several stalks with the left hand, and bend over and cut them at the ground with the harvesting knife in the right hand. The harvester would continue to hold a group of stalks in the left hand until it filled up, when he would place them on the ground for the women to come by and bind them up in a bundle, to be gathered up later. Invariably, some of the stalks would escape the harvester's hand and fall to the ground. This is what the gleaners would pick up. It would be difficult work in the hot sun, with a great deal of effort required for very modest gain. One commentator said it would be analogous to someone today trying to provide for themselves by picking up aluminum cans on the side of the road. This is the work Ruth will undertake this day, trying to get enough grain to provide both for herself and her mother-in-law.

But which field should she work? She knew no one, and there were dangers involved in this work. Gleaners were often mistreated, and the fact of her Moabite nationality, together with the fact that she had no male protectors in her life, would have made Ruth an even more likely target of abuse. Four times in chapter 2, Boaz alludes to this danger in his insistence to his workers that they protect Ruth. Some of you can identify with Ruth's predicament of facing a world filled with dangers and uncertainties and not knowing what step to take. I was speaking with someone last week who lost his business in his late fifties. The day came when he got up in the morning and didn't know what to do. He had lost everything and had no plan for what he should do next.

What difference does all this talk of the providence of God make when you're faced with such a challenge in life? It makes all the difference in the world. Ruth very simply did two things. She continued in her determination to love Naomi, and she took the best action she knew to take. Let's look separately at each of these.

Ruth took action. She didn't wait for certainty, but made the best decision she could and started gleaning. It is believing in the providence of God that allows us to do so. If God is in control of all things, it takes the pressure off of us to figure everything out. We must simply make the best decision we can with the resources God has given us, resources such as common sense and the counsel of others, and then act. One of the problems we have in doing this is that we know that whenever we decide to act, we are closing the door to many other possible actions. Since we are not omniscient, how can we do that? Because there is a God who loves us who is omniscient. He is the author of all our circumstances, and he has already limited the options available to us. We can go ahead and commit to something because we believe there is a God in heaven who has authority over all things and who loves us.

The other quality guiding Ruth was her determination to love Naomi. She allows her options to be narrowed by the need of the person in her life God had called her to love. She doesn't pursue personal freedom and happiness as her top goals in life. Those are the values of our culture, but if you pursue those first of all, you end up frozen, unable to decide. But if you start with a belief in the good providence of God and his command to love those he has put in your life, you will be able to act appropriately. I like what David Brooks, a columnist for the *New York Times* wrote about this.

[College] graduates are told to: Follow *your* passion, chart *your* own course, march to the beat of *your* own drummer, follow *your* dreams and find *yourself*...

But this talk is of no help to the central business of adulthood, finding serious things to tie yourself down to...

Most successful young people don't look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life. A relative suffers from Alzheimer's and a young woman feels called to help cure that disease. A young man works under a miserable boss and must develop management skills so his department can function...

Most people don't form a self and then lead a life. They are called by a problem, and the self is constructed gradually by their calling.

... When you read a biography of someone you admire, it's rarely the things that made them happy that compel your admiration. It's the things they did to court unhappiness—the things they did that were arduous and miserable. P. 74

## **CONCLUSION:**

The providence of God gives hope, and you can't live without hope. I don't know where you are right now in your life, but if you are battling despair or the crippling effect of too many options, God calls you to trust his providence. He is working to bring you to resurrection. Your part is to die by doing what Ruth did, giving yourself to love those God has put in your life.