

**“The Path to Happiness”**  
**Ruth 2:4-12**  
**October 19, 2014**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Do you want happiness? Are you happy right now? If you are not happy right now, what is your plan to get happiness? Many Christians are suspicious of happiness, thinking that pursuing it will be harmful to our spiritual lives. I don't agree. I prefer viewing this the way John Piper does when he speaks of Christian hedonism. Piper says that God is most glorified when we seek our happiness in him. It is the most natural thing in the world to desire happiness. You were created for happiness. What is distinctive about Christianity is its teaching about the path to happiness. To believe in God doesn't mean that we lose our desire for happiness. It means instead that the search for happiness can end because we find our happiness in God.

The oldest lie in human history is the one Satan told Adam and Eve. He said that God can't be trusted to give them happiness, and that their only hope for finding it would be to ignore what God said and take matters into their own hands. That path did not lead to happiness, but to its opposite. The powers of chaos were unleashed in their lives, and everything began falling apart. Ruth has made the opposite choice, to align herself with the God of Israel no matter what. She experienced what we referred to in our last sermon as the hockey stick pattern of life, a life that goes down into death but then turns up to resurrection. Ruth's decision to follow God led to significant suffering, but also to her ultimate happiness. In today's passage, we begin to see the unfolding of this happiness. We get to see in this story the kind of life that leads to happiness, and I want to highlight two features of it.

**I. Trusting the Strength of God**

Ruth trusted in God. Boaz speaks of this in his blessing of Ruth in verse 12. **“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!”** Taking refuge under the wings of God is a common way in the Old Testament to speak of trusting God. Not many of us have grown up on farms, where this imagery would be quite familiar. In a farmyard, it is common to see chickens with their little chicks around them. If you chase one of the chicks, it will run to its mother, who will cover it with her wings. To get to that chick, you will have to contend with its mother. I suppose it's a universal characteristic of mothers both human and animal that they will fiercely defend their young. When Wendy and I were in Canada last year, we saw quite a few moose, and some of them quite close up. I had heard that there

were far more human fatalities in Canada from encounters with moose than with grizzly bears. I wasn't afraid of any moose until one day when I had paused for rest after climbing a big mountain on my bicycle. Less than fifty feet from where I was standing, a mother moose passed with her 2-3 month old calf behind her. Armed with my recent knowledge of human fatalities from moose, I was careful to stand very still and make no movement that she might interpret as threatening. God also fiercely defends all those who seek refuge in him.

Ruth had sought refuge under the wings of God, which means that she was trusting in the God of Israel. This is both the easiest thing in the world to do and the most difficult all at the same time. It is easy because we do nothing other than appeal to the strength of God in our weakness. That's what the chick does who seeks refuge under the wings of its mother. The chick doesn't have to fight because the mother will do any fighting that is necessary. But it is also the most difficult thing in the world to do because it requires no longer trusting in yourself. That is the great rival to trust in God. If the chick thinks it can do a better job of taking care of itself than its mother, it will go it alone without seeking refuge under its mother's wings. To trust in God requires leaving all self-trust, things such as money, good-looks, accomplishments and approval of others. This means that we refuse to take control of our own lives, but instead trust God's control of our lives.

I heard an interview this week with the actor Neil Patrick Harris about a new book containing his memoirs. I was struck by the title of the book: *Choose Your Own Autobiography*. I don't know if Harris or his publisher chose that title, but the notion behind it is exactly what I'm talking about regarding the opposite of trust in God. It accurately expresses the spirit of our age, in which we think we can control everything about our lives and choose the kind of life we want, the kind of life we think will make us happy. But the truth is that when we run our own lives, the result is not happiness, but its opposite. In his book *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, philosopher John Gray comments on the epidemic of drug use and addictions in Western societies. "Drug use is a tacit admission of a forbidden truth," the truth that "for most people happiness is beyond reach."

Ruth chose a different path, one in which she left everything to trust in the God of Israel, taking refuge under his protective care. She left her land and her people in order to follow Jehovah, something that was extremely rare in her day. Though she did not have the blood of Abraham within her, she had the faith of Abraham, who also left land and people to follow God. Happiness comes not by taking control of life, but by signing over control of our lives to God. This helps explain the wording of Boaz's blessing upon Ruth in verse 12. Boaz prays, "**The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord.**" Some are confused by this, thinking that it teaches a type of works righteousness. But it doesn't. Boaz is not saying that Ruth has

done something to earn God's blessing. He's simply reflecting on the fact that she has left everything to seek refuge in him, and is now praying that Ruth would experience the happy result of seeking refuge in God. Life is lived as a trajectory. When your life is lived in self-trust, you set a trajectory that ends in disappointment, isolation and misery. When you seek refuge in God, it is a trajectory that ends in satisfaction and happiness. Boaz is simply blessing Ruth with a prayer that she begin to experience the happiness that always comes to those who trust God. It is the same thing Jesus spoke of after Peter said that they had left everything to follow Jesus. **"Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life"** (Luke 18:29-30).

If life is lived as a trajectory, then we each need to ask ourselves where the trajectory of our life is headed. The ultimate end of both trajectories is hell for those who trust themselves, and heaven for those who, like Ruth, trust God and seek refuge in him. Ruth can help us answer this question of which trajectory we're on by noticing the powerful results trusting God had in her life. I notice two of them in our text, and our trust in God produces the same two results. First, it has given her the ability to endure great hardship. She has lost everything, and now has yoked herself to a depressed woman. She is able to endure such suffering because she trusts that there is meaning in the universe run by the personal God she follows. She may not know what the meaning is, but it is there. When we trust God, we become able to endure suffering. Will Willimon is the former Bishop of the Alabama Methodist Conference. He tells a story from early in his ministry when he was called to the hospital by a church member who had just given birth. He arrived to find the couple waiting for the doctor, who had given them the ominous news that there was something wrong with the birth. When the doctor came in, he explained that the child had been born with Down syndrome and another minor and correctable respiratory condition. He said, "My recommendation is for you to consider just letting nature take its course, and then in a few days there shouldn't be a problem." To say it without the euphemisms, just don't be saddled with the care of a child with such needs. When the couple refused the doctor's advice, he looked to Willimon for help, urging him to "talk some reason into them." But Willimon, like all who trust in God, realized it was the doctor who needed someone to talk some reason into him. Like his church members, he believed that God is in control of all such things, and that when he chooses to allow suffering into the lives of his children, he brings great blessing with it. Such a belief gives us the power to endure.

Ruth also exhibits great courage as a result of her trust in God. We get a glimpse into what she's feeling in her response to Boaz's kindness when he guaranteed her safety from the young men. She fell on her face in gratitude (v. 10). That shows that Ruth was fully aware of the dangers she was facing when

she went out to glean, but she went anyway. Remember that this was the Dark Ages of Israel, the period of the Judges. There is a story in Judges 19 of a Levite who gives his concubine to a mob of men in order to save his own life, and she is abused all night long and dies. When we trust God, we are given some powerful resources for approaching life with courage. We believe that God is both in control and fully able to care for us.

## **II. Receiving the Strength of the Community**

In the early part of our passage, Boaz finally appears on the scene and begins to interact with Ruth. Boaz is first introduced to us in verse 1, before he makes an appearance in the story, and we learn that he is a “worthy” man. That word means that he is a man of influence, probably the most powerful man in Bethlehem. Ruth is at the complete opposite end of the social spectrum. If Boaz had the most social capital, Ruth had the least. She was a woman unattached to any man, which would have put her at a significant disadvantage in this culture. And she was a foreigner. This would be equivalent to the most influential businessman of our city interacting with an unmarried homeless woman with children. Boaz sees her gleaning in his field and doesn’t recognize her. His foreman explains who she is, and Boaz has heard the news of Naomi’s return with her Moabite daughter-in-law.

Why does Boaz show an interest in Ruth? Some commentators, who I think have read too many romance novels, think that his interest is romantic, as if he sees the hot Moabite chick in his field and wants to get to know her. That is misreading the text on a number of levels. Boaz’s motives, I believe, are to welcome her into the community. He has obviously heard of her conversion, and he knows of her desperate need. Even though she is a foreigner, he realizes that they share in common a faith in Jehovah, and that makes her part of the community. So as the most influential man of his community, he acts to welcome her fully. Let me point out some of the things he does to welcome her.

I notice first that he calls her “my daughter.” She was a vulnerable woman because she was unattached to any man in the community. In calling her “my daughter,” Boaz is saying that she can come under his protection. When he directs her to drink from the water drawn by his young men, he is doing more than providing a way to quench her thirst. It is another way of welcoming her into the community. Remember the significance of drinking fountains in our city prior to the Civil Rights era. It’s about more than water. To drink from the same vessels is a clear symbol of unity.

Boaz acts to protect Ruth. He doesn’t trust the young men of the community, so he commands them not to touch her. He realizes how sexually vulnerable she is, and he sends a clear message to the young men that if they

mess with her, they will have to answer to him. Since no one wanted to make Boaz their enemy, they will respect his warning. Most cultures, with the obvious exception of our own, don't trust young men around young women. Paul Miller says, "Traditional culture protected young women's purity like a precious jewel... Being sexually intimate outside of marriage is like giving a stranger the title for your car and hoping he will eventually pay the cost." Women giving their bodies in hopes that it will lead to a commitment to marriage often wake up to find themselves having given their best to someone who eventually discards them when the cost of the relationship outweighs the advantages he has been taking. Boaz protects this vulnerable young woman.

I also see his welcome of her into the community by the directness of his commands to her. Notice that he doesn't say, "Hey, Ruth, if you want to glean in my field, feel free to do so." He is far more direct, giving six specific commands to her about her gleaning and taking of water. Is Boaz just being bossy here? As a powerful man, he would have been accustomed to giving orders. Is that all this is? I don't think so. He is being sensitive to what she was feeling, which would have been uncertainty about everything in this new land in which she was living. Boaz could put himself in the shoes of another and do what they needed. A side application to this is to attend the poverty simulation we will be having here in a couple of weeks. It is hard to love those economically disadvantaged until you understand what it's like to live in their shoes. Boaz made the attempt to understand that for Ruth and as a result was equipped to meet her need.

To be happy, you need a Boaz in your life to welcome you into the community of God's people. We have seen throughout our study of Ruth how this little story contains some wonderful pictures of Jesus. Ruth shows us Jesus in her unconditional love for Naomi. The narrator has shown us Jesus in his hope and optimism. And in today's passage, Boaz shows us what Jesus is like. You have a Boaz to welcome you into the community of God's people, and his name is Jesus. Like Boaz, he protects and provides. He calls us his brothers. Not only does he welcome us into the community of God's people, he also welcomes us into the fellowship of the Trinity. He is the ultimate insider.

## **CONCLUSION:**

What do you think it will take to make you happy? It's actually a pretty short list. You need to trust God instead of yourself, and you need to belong to a loving, protective community, namely the church. There is a long list that sweetens our happiness, but nothing on that long list will bring happiness if trust in God and belonging to God's community is missing. Let's close with a prayer of repentance for believing Satan's lies and seeking our happiness outside of God.