

SERIES: The Gospel According to Ruth
 SERMON: **We Intend; God Superintends**
 SCRIPTURE: Ruth 2:1-23
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
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Southern Baptist preacher Jess Moody once said, "May the dear Lord teach me that the more candles on my birthday cake, the more like Jesus I am supposed to become." Would that we all had such a goal and attitude!

Unfortunately, there seem to be a lot of Christians who feel that getting saved is the sum total of the Christian's experience. Once they make a profession of faith in Christ (and perhaps get baptized), they sit back in their spiritual easy chairs, go to church when nothing more important gets in their way, give when their consciences force them to, and pray at the dinner table (unless they're in a restaurant, of course). They don't spend time daily in God's Word, they don't involve themselves in intercessory prayer, they don't serve the Lord in any visible way, and they certainly don't share their faith.

Ruth was not such a person. Last week we were introduced to this young Moabite woman as she was making a critical decision to leave her family and homeland to join the people of faith. What a picture of God's ideal woman she presents! A faith in God that sees beyond present bitter setbacks. Freedom from desperately clinging to the security and comforts of this world. Courage to venture into the strange and the unknown. Radical commitment to the relationships appointed by God.

Today we will find her following up on her decision with actions that reveal the tremendous depth of her character and her faith. Let's review the story briefly. When a famine hit Israel during the period of the Judges, a Jewish man from Bethlehem named Elimelech took his wife Naomi and his two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, and moved to Moab, a foreign nation under God's curse, to find food. After Elimelech died there, his two sons married Moabite women, contrary to God's express will for His people. Then the two sons also died, leaving Naomi with her two daughters-in-law—all three widowed. All this happened in the space of ten years.

Naomi recognized the discipline of the Lord in her life, became quite bitter and hopeless, and decided to return to Bethlehem when she heard that the famine in Israel was over. Despite many obstacles, Ruth decided to go with her. She committed herself to her Jewish mother-in-law, but more importantly, to Naomi's God, the one true God, the God of Israel. Today in the second chapter we will see Ruth blossom as a woman of faith. We will also see an incredible love story unfold.

Please follow along in your Bibles as I read the second chapter of the book of Ruth, which is the eighth book of the Old Testament, right after the Pentateuch, Joshua, and Judges.

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz.

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." So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field

belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.

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

"The LORD bless you!" they called back.

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

The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. 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."

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. 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."

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?"

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. 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."

"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."

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. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her."

So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough.

Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!"

Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said.

"The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers."

Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.'"

Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to

go with his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed."
So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

I would like for us to approach this chapter by means of three theological principles that follow directly on the message of last Sunday.

The providence of God is *continually* fashioning the details of our lives.

There is a phrase in verse 3 that I wish to camp on for a few moments. It's the phrase, "As it turned out . . ." "As it turned out, Ruth found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz." The KJV translates it, "Her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz." The ESV reads, "She happened to come . . ." It is clear from all these versions that Ruth did not consciously choose that particular field. She did not know the owner. She had no ulterior motive.

The average American would say, "she was lucky enough to stop at," or "by coincidence she arrived at." But Ruth's happy coincidence was not a surprise to God. She stopped in Boaz' field because He planned it that way. How do I know that? Because the Scriptures indicate frequently that God is sovereign over everything, even the contingencies of life. One of the strongest statements to that effect is Proverbs 16:33: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." And earlier in the same chapter we read these words: "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. The Lord works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster."

I'm reminded of the words of Joseph (whose story has some amazing parallels to Ruth's, by the way), as he said to his fear-stricken brothers, who had years before thrown him in a pit and left him for dead: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:19-20). Humanly speaking Joseph had a whole string of bad luck, incredibly unfortunate coincidences. But in retrospect he could say with full certainty that God planned it all and meant it all for good purposes. We intend, but God superintends.

Friends, to me this is one of the most profound and profitable truths you can possibly grasp: your coincidences, your misfortunes, your good fortunes, your mistakes, your successes are all part of God's plan for your life—some for discipline, some for blessing, and some for purposes you may never know.

I don't mean for a moment that you are a puppet on the end of a string God is dangling from heaven. God bears a different relationship to some events in your life than to others. Some of things happen by God's directive will and some only by His permissive will. That is, He permits some things that He doesn't even like. Nevertheless, God is in control, working all things after the counsel of His own will.

Now I find that a lot of people, even a lot of professing Christians, don't really believe that. I

suspect there are a fair number of people here this morning who have a fundamental objection to the idea that the providence of God is so all-encompassing. The notion of luck is deeply ingrained in our culture and we have a very hard time grasping how providence can co-exist with the freedom of the human will.

There is even a relatively recent heresy that has gotten quite a foothold among evangelicals called *the openness of God* (actually it's an old heresy with a new name).¹ Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and Greg Boyd are among the advocates of open theism, claiming that while God knows everything that can be known, the future is of a different nature and cannot be known even by God. If you want to explore the topic, I recommend a book that critiques Open Theism by Millard Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He know It?*

I believe *balance* is the key word when we begin to talk about God's providence. It is possible to both under-emphasize and overemphasize God's hand in our circumstances. Those who under-emphasize God's control, tend to fret their way through life, hoping against hope their luck will improve. They are subject to mood swings and anxiety because there are no solid anchors for their souls. They tend to be manipulators, because after all, the ultimate outcome of events is only what they can make of them. That is not a healthy way to live, nor is it biblical.

But I think it is also possible to overemphasize God's control. Some people put so much stress on predestination and election that they become, in effect, Christian fatalists. They are like the Calvinist who fell down the stairs, got up, brushed himself off, and said, "Whew! I'm glad that's over!" One would almost get the notion that he didn't fall down the stairs but God tripped him. Such people can be tempted to minimize prayer, since God is going to do what He's going to do, minimize evangelism, since God is going to save whomever He wants, and even take sin lightly because, after all, God can even bring good out of our mistakes.

But as a philosophy of life Christian fatalism is no better than blind chance. The best way to live, as I see it, is to know that God is sovereign, watch for His leading, try to discern His plan for our life, but realize that much of the time the decisions we make will be blind ones, like Ruth's. Things will seem to just happen, and we won't see the evidence until later, if at all, that God's hand was in it all the time.

I have mentioned on more than one occasion that I have a pet peeve—it's people who talk like they have an inside track on God's plan. They never seem to be in doubt about what field they should glean in. They are constantly saying things like, "The Lord told me to do this," "the Lord told me to go there," "God revealed such-and-such to me." You know what? I don't believe them. I think they talk that way because it sounds so spiritual.

Dr. Harry Ironside, the famous pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, once said that about 80% of the time he didn't know for sure what God's will was when he had to make a decision. Usually God would confirm His will later, but at the time, Ironside made his decisions based upon reason and common sense and the general parameters of Scripture. If a man as godly as Ironside was flying blind, I suspect you and I are, too, most of the time.

As it turned out, Ruth found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz. And *as it turned out* I ran into a man named Gary Jost in a crowded ice cream store in Ames, Iowa in 1984. He was my brother's best friend in highschool and he was looking for a pastor for a new church he was launching in St. Louis. Four months later I left Wichita to go to St. Louis, where we spent the next 20 years.

As it turned out nearly seven years ago I happened to drive through Wichita on my way from K.C. to Arkansas and called Dan Wilson to see if I could stop and see him and Susan. That meeting led to our return to this church to finish out our ministry years.

If you stop to think about it, there are similar events in your life that “just happened.” Some of you could tell amazing stories about how you met your life partner, or chose your career, or moved to Wichita. But, how critical it is to realize that behind our blind decisions is a God who cares, a God who plans, and a God who works all things after the counsel of His own will. The providence of God is continually fashioning the details of our lives.

Responsible behavior is a key ingredient in the outworking of God's plan.

What I want to convey to you here is that there is no need for us to pit predestination against freedom of the will, or God's providence against human responsibility. Both are taught in Scripture, and therefore both are true, whether or not we can always see how they work together. I don't even know why we should *expect* to understand everything about God's plan. If we did, we would be equal to Him, and such a God wouldn't be worth worshiping.

God is clearly at work in Ruth's life to bring her to a certain field at a certain time for a certain purpose. But Ruth is not an automaton, not a pawn in God's hand being moved inexorably against her will and better judgment. In fact, God's providence incorporates the godly character and the responsible conduct of this remarkable woman.

Ruth demonstrates responsibility by putting feet to her faith. Ruth has made a commitment and has followed through with it by traveling to Bethlehem with Naomi. But having reached that spiritual safe haven, she doesn't sit back and take a vacation; she doesn't apply for welfare; she doesn't ask Naomi, “now that you've got me here, what are you going to do for me?”

No, in Ruth 2:2 we read, “And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, ‘Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor.’ And she said, ‘Go, my daughter.’ So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers.” Notice that she volunteers to work, she requests permission to follow up her commitment with diligence. I believe her responsible behavior is a factor God uses in providentially bringing her and Boaz together.

Now let me offer a little background. Ruth is taking advantage of the workfare system God set

up for the Jewish people. We read about it in more detail in Lev. 19:9,10: “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God.” The same law is repeated four chapters later.

You see, God is concerned about the poor and sees it as the responsibility of those who have plenty to meet the needs of those who have nothing, but not by giving them food. Notice two important factors in this Divine War on Poverty: (1) Greed by the rich is denounced and forbidden. The landowner is prohibited from running his combine over the field twice, and from cutting the corners square. But in addition, (2) Laziness by the poor is denounced and forbidden. The poor have to work for their share. There are no soup lines; there are work lines.

What a reversal of these two factors we have seen in western society today, as both greed on the part of many of the rich, and laziness on the part of many of the poor combine to the point that nearly one in every three tax dollars goes to support someone who isn't working, and actually often has disincentives to work. And if it's bad here, just imagine living in Greece or France, where people are rioting right now because their state-mandated pensions may not be available for retirement at age 50 at virtually full pay!

Ruth, on the other hand, is grateful for God's workfare system and is eager to take advantage of it by working diligently. She works steadily all day with just one brief rest in the shelter. And she continues to work, according to verse 23, until the barley and wheat harvests are finished.

Not only does Ruth live responsibly by putting feet to her faith, but so does the individual to whom we are introduced in verse 4.

Boaz demonstrates responsibility by allowing God to impact his professional and personal life. Verse 4 says, “Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, 'The Lord be with you!' 'The Lord bless you!' they called back.” Why do you think the author would include in such a short story a record of the greeting between a boss and his employees? I think because it is so unusual. Many field workers in that day were slaves; if not slaves, they were certainly members of a lower social class than Boaz, who was obviously a rich and powerful man. Yet he takes the time to greet the workers, and not only to greet them, but to call for the blessing of God on their lives. And clearly these are more than pious platitudes in Boaz' mouth.

Pardon me for a slight excursion, but right here in this verse you have the answer to most of the labor/management problems that are constantly erupting in our society. That answer is for people to live their faith in their professional life. I don't mean that the mere saying of “God bless you” to one another is by itself a sufficient labor relations tool. But Boaz sets a tone by treating his employees with respect, and the workers respond in kind. There is no need for a farm worker's union in Boaz' field.

I know our situation is very different today. We don't live in an agrarian society, and our customs and culture are miles from that of Bethlehem in 1100 B.C. But frankly, if the 50 million Americans who claim to be born-again allowed their faith to impact their professional lives, if the bosses were more like Boaz and the workers more like Ruth, it would make a tremendous difference.

Let me ask you to consider the ten people you work most closely with, whether over you or under you. Do they know you're a Christian? Do they feel affirmed by you and cared for? Do they see your Christian faith making any sort of difference in your work ethic? When you see something dishonest going on, do they know you will speak up, not in self-righteously, but nevertheless with conviction? If so, praise God. May your tribe increase! If not, why not learn a lesson from Boaz? Your faith is relevant to your business life.

But Boaz not only greets his workers with kindness and dignity. He also is attentive and interested in them, as evidenced by the fact that he notices the new person among the field hands and regular gleaners. The more cynical among us might be tempted to think that he probably always had his eyes open for vulnerable young harvest interns, and that what he really said to the foreman was, "Who's the new chick with the dark tan?"

But that doesn't fit the character of Boaz as revealed in the whole story. He asks his foreman "Who is she?" out of genuine concern for her. Actually a different sort of boss might have complained, "Don't we have enough welfare gleaners around her? Why doesn't she go to someone else's field? These people are always getting in the way of my combines and besides, having so many poor around is bad for property values." But instead Boaz sees her as another person God has brought into his life, another opportunity to use his resources to help someone needy. He isn't in love with her and he doesn't expect to be. He isn't aware that this particular day is going to be the first day of the rest of his life. But he does have a lifestyle of expecting God to use him, and that is what helps create this opportunity.

There's an old saying that good players draw good cards. In baseball it is often said that the best pitchers get the calls from the umpires. There's a measure of truth to all of this, for skill and good fortune have a very complex relationship. But the thoughtful Christian will put it differently. He will be inclined to say that God in His providence is bringing Ruth and Boaz together, but her diligence and his kindness are not irrelevant to God's choices. It is not by accident, not totally arbitrary that God chooses to direct the steps of Ruth to this man's field.

Let me note for you another area of his life in which Boaz demonstrates responsibility, and that is in regard to his personal life. While I don't think he is a man on the prowl, it is also clear that it doesn't take him long to develop more than a casual interest in the young Moabite widow. He asks his foreman who she is and the foreman identifies Ruth as the woman who recently returned with her mother-in-law Naomi.

Immediately Boaz perks up his ears, for Naomi is related to him by marriage; i.e. Boaz was a relative of Elimelech. This is going to become an extremely important factor in the next chapter,

so remember it. He has perhaps heard through the grapevine (remember how all the town gossips were talking) the remarkable story of how Ruth left her homeland and family to come to Israel with Naomi. He is also impressed that Ruth has worked diligently all day.

Boaz decides that he will do something special for this one who has shown kindness to his aunt Naomi. He invites her to continue to glean in his field and to stay with his servant girls, who were generally treated better than the gleaners. He also offers her protection from the field hands, who were known to behave in a *ruthless* fashion at times, and gives her permission to drink from the water jars reserved for employees.

She is profoundly humbled by his kindness and wonders aloud why she has found such favor in his eyes, especially since she is a foreigner. Boaz replies that her reputation has preceded her, and he is praying that God will repay her for her love and commitment to Naomi and provide refuge for her under His wings, i.e. God's wings. The picture is of God as a great winged Eagle and Ruth as a threatened little eaglet, coming to find safety under the Eagle's wings.ⁱⁱ Little does Boaz know that *he* will become the answer to his own prayer.

Again Ruth responds with humble gratitude, recognizing that she doesn't even deserve the standing of a servant girl, and yet Boaz has shown her so much kindness. Boaz is so impressed with her attitude that he decides to invite her to eat lunch with the hired workers, and he makes sure there is food left over for her to take home with her. Then he instructs his men to go easy on her. In fact, they are to drop some grain on purpose so she can pick it up. But through it all, he treats her with respect. There is no hint of Boaz hitting on her or taking advantage of her in any way.

In fact, look at the last verse in the chapter. It says, "So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law." It is clear by now that Boaz and Ruth are falling in love, but they are not living together. She is still living with her widowed mother-in-law and taking care of her.

Living together has become an incredibly common thing in our day. We've come to expect it of Generation X, but it's reaching into all strata of society, including seniors. It's not unusual for us to receive guest registrations on Sunday morning which indicate that two unmarried people are living together. Now let me say very clearly that I am glad these people are coming to church. I have no problem welcoming any person with any lifestyle into the house of God. The church is not a country club for saints but a hospital for sinners.

But living together is not God's will for unmarried couples, and it's not going to help people prepare for marriage, as many of them seem to think. The liberal morality of today is not leading to stronger and longer marriages; it is leading to more divorce and pain and self-destructiveness. We need to return to the high moral standards and respect exhibited by Ruth and Boaz in their love relationship.

When the providence of God is combined with responsible human behavior, the potential for blessing is *enormous*.

Now I know some person with a truly reformed theology is going to take issue with how I stated that, thinking I am trying to put the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man on the same level, but I'm not. God's sovereignty has no equal. His providence is not dependent upon what human beings do. Nor do I believe God develops His plan based on His foreknowledge of how human beings are going to behave. As I have said twice before today, quoting Eph. 1, "He works all things after the counsel of His own will." And yet, He somehow incorporates the responsible behavior of free moral agents into that will.

It is clear to me that the character and behavior of Ruth and Boaz are given to us as examples, and if we follow their example of diligence and faith and kindness and godly character, we are inevitably going to experience the blessing of God to a greater degree than is otherwise possible, if not in this life, then certainly in the next. It's not because we have earned His grace, because grace by its very nature is never earned but freely given. It's God's grace that enables our cooperation, our diligence, our faith. As one writer put it so well, "God is not an employer looking for employees. He is an Eagle looking for people who will take refuge under his wings."ⁱⁱⁱ

Conclusion: In our text today we have seen how the diligence of Ruth has combined with the generous, godly character of Boaz to set the stage for a deep and abiding love affair—all under the guiding and superintending hand of God. But I also want you to notice how Ruth and Boaz serve as a beautiful picture of God's protective love toward all those upon whom He sets His affection.

Even though we were once, like Ruth, poor hopeless foreigners with no claim on God's grace, He nevertheless reached out to us in love. In the words of Ephesians 2:12, "you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world, now in Christ we who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ."

Furthermore, God doesn't just admit us into His family as second-class citizens, and then abandon us. He, like Boaz, provides our every need, offers us every protection, and continually seeks our highest good. Listen to Isaiah 43:1-3, where God says, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched. Nor will the flame burn you. For I am the Lord your God."

And in the NT we read, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? . . . For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

These passages do not promise that we will not have trials and tribulations but they do imply that such will come only by God's permission and only for our good. This is the kind and merciful God in whom I call you to put your trust today.

i. When I speak of a viewpoint as a “heresy” I am not at all suggesting that these individuals are unbelievers. Apostates are unbelievers, but heretics are by definition believers who have a viewpoint in some area that is outside the bounds of historic orthodoxy. I believe there are sound arguments against the openness of God historical, theological, and biblical, but Clark Pinnock, Greg Boyd, and John Sanders are all brothers in Christ in Christ who happen to have what I believe is an heretical view on the omniscience of God. The fact is there are heresies in all denominations and branches of Christianity. I may even believe some heresies myself, though I cannot tell you what they are, for if I could identify them I would reject them.

ii. John Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, 66-67.

iii. Piper, 72.