

Ruth 3: God provides, but play your part!

Have you ever heard the story/joke about the man who was trapped in his house during a flood? Well, he was praying for God to save him. When the flood waters flooded his basement, he went to the second story. A rescue boat came by to save him, but he said, "No, I'm praying God would save me!" Then the flood waters got up the second story and so he went to the roof and another rescue boat came by, but he said, "No, I'm praying. God will save me!" Then finally his house starts to sink and he is struggling in the water, when a helicopter comes by. He still refuses by saying, "No, I have faith! God will save me!" Well, finally he drowns. He gets to Heaven and in front of God he says, "Why didn't you save me? I was praying the whole time!" God replies, "I answered your prayer 3 times! I sent two boats and a helicopter!"

This is a popular story out there and it is really asking a question of God's providence. I know God is sovereign and He is good and He is working all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes ([Rom. 8:28](#)), but what am I supposed to do in light of the fact that God is a God of Providence? Should I sit around and wait for a sign of some sort? Should I open the Bible and play Bible roulette and look for a verse? What does the human side of divine providence look like? What are our responsibilities in light of the fact of God's goodness and sovereignty? Ruth 3 will shed some light on this for us today. We saw God's hidden hand of providence brining Ruth and Naomi back to Bethlehem in Ruth 1 and guiding Ruth on to Boaz's field in Ruth 2. Here is our first thought. God provides but we play our part by:

I. Seize opportunities despite the past ([Ruth 3:1-5](#)).

As we left off last time at the end of chapter 2, we were left waiting. Ruth was diligently and faithfully working in the fields for several weeks, but we are not told if Boaz made any moves. The two widows had shown up at Bethlehem with two major worries: food and family. The food problem seemed to be solved with Ruth gleaning enough food for the rest of the year. However, what about her widowhood?

This chapter is the turning point of the entire story. Yet it is a very tricky passage with everything happening between sunset and sunrise of a single day. Most of the events of this chapter happen in the dark. There is an element of secrecy. Yet we see that behind it all and in the darkness, God is acting and working behind the scenes.

Naomi finally shows some life here in [Ruth 3:1](#). She too has been wondering about the future. Is Ruth going to keep gleaning like this forever? Is she going to try to provide for her, a poor old

mother-in-law for the rest of her life? Ruth was committed to Naomi but was it fair that Naomi sit by and watch Ruth slave away rather than having a life and family of her own? There was no one else to take care of Ruth's future so Naomi feels like it is her responsibility to arrange something.

In those days it was normal for parents to arrange marriages for their children. It would have normally been the dad's role to go and find the next relative in line according to the kinsman redeemer law, and approach him about the possibility of redeeming the land and marrying the daughter. There was no obligation on the relative to do this however. If the man refused, he would go down to the next in line of single men in the extended family and see if any would do such a thing. If not, the widow is left in poverty to survive.

Over the past several weeks, Naomi had seen God's kindness to them through Boaz. It has filled her heart with hope again. Bitterness has been replaced with blessing.

Naomi knows the security found in having a husband, the basic necessities of life (food, shelter, clothing) and children and makes a plan to get this for Ruth.

So what is her plan? First of all, Boaz is a "relative" meaning he is qualified to be a potential redeemer. His earlier kindness toward Ruth displayed his interest. Secondly, he will be winnowing barley that night. Naomi's point was that Boaz would be in a secluded spot where he and Ruth could have some time to speak freely without any gossipers around.

Winnowing is the process of removing the grain from the plant, a job we have combine harvesters for these days. Harvested grain was first bundled in the field, then carried manually or by cart to the threshing floor, which was an open space of either exposed bedrock or hard, stamped earth (see slide). There the grain was threshed, which meant beaten with a hammer or trampled under by animals or crushed under cartwheels. The purpose was to remove the husks from the kernels. Winnowing then separated the kernels from the husks, chaff and stalks. With a fork or shovel, the winnower repeatedly tossed the mixture into the prevailing breeze (see slide). The wind scattered the lighter chaff a distance away and the heavier grain fell near the winnower.

After being sifted with a sieve, the kernels were collected in piles, the straw fed to the animals and the chaff used for fuel. To winnow well, one needs a steady breeze; not too strong or gusty. This is why Naomi said to go at night, partly because most people would be winnowing then, trying to take advantage of the evening breeze. After this, the grain was then removed from the threshing floor and placed in heaps, either to be sold in the morning or stored in the granary. To keep their grain safe they would sleep by it.

But Ruth is not to rush off to the threshing floor without making some preparations for herself first. So Naomi says take a bath and put on some sort of perfume. Remember deodorant was not invented yet; so with the hot climate, certain oils were used to combat body odours.

Now remember that Ruth is a widow. When a widow is mourning, she wears certain clothes, even when working out in the fields. This may be the reason why Boaz was not making any moves toward Ruth at this point. As a honourable man, he would never want to impose on Ruth if she needed more time to grieve. So in effect, when Naomi is giving her these instructions, she is telling Ruth that it is time to move on with life, letting Boaz know that she is ready to resume with normal life, including marriage, if that was possible. So really these instructions were more than just getting all dressed up to make Ruth seem attractive.

Naomi has this whole plan all mapped out with all possible scenarios thought through. She tells Ruth to hide out and try not to be noticed. She advises Ruth to wait until Boaz had eaten and drank and is lying down.

If everything worked according to plan, both Ruth and Boaz can talk privately, away from people. Well, there is more to the plan. Ruth needs to make sure Boaz is asleep. Once he sleeps, she was to go and uncover and lie down at his feet.

What is the purpose of “uncovering his feet” and lying down? Naomi is thinking, “How can we get Boaz to wake up without totally startling him?” Why? Well, how many of you hate it when your spouse steals the blanket during the night? My wife’s argument is always that her feet are cold! So Naomi cleverly figures that if Boaz’s feet were exposed to the increasing chill of the night air, he would soon awaken due to discomfort, try to pull the blanket back and then see Ruth at his feet! She assures Ruth that Boaz will then tell her what to do.

Once again, Ruth shows herself committed to Naomi. That speech of commitment ([Ruth 1:16-17](#)) was not just words, she is following through on it. We don’t know anything regarding Ruth’s motives, fears, or expectations; or her faith in God to prosper her. But nevertheless, she says she will do everything as Naomi has asked.

This idea raises some questions. What should we make of Naomi’s plan? Was this a normal custom? I don’t think so by the secret nature of the whole thing. Why didn’t Naomi just go to Boaz or the town elders during the day and ask him/them about this? Why ask Ruth to enter an uncertain, compromising situation with a great deal hanging in the balance?

Naomi is gambling that Boaz will not take unfair sexual advantage of Ruth. Normally prostitutes, knowing that men would be sleeping on the threshing floor, would come to ask men for favors (Hos. 9:1). What is one to think of a woman, who bathes, puts on perfume and then in the dark of night, goes to a field where a man is sleeping and is uncovering his blanket?

We cannot judge her motives. I do not think this was the best idea and there may have been other options, but there is one thing that encourages me about Naomi. God's kindness has awakened hope in her heart again. Remember in the beginning of Ruth 2, she does not go out and glean and still seems bitter. But now hope has made her alive again! She truly felt that God was attacking her at one point, but she slowly started to see that He, in His providence, was in fact blessing her.

Some after experiencing difficult circumstances become pessimistic; whatever happens happens! I'm just going to sit here and not do anything. Everything is always the same. Every year is the same. It will always be as it has always been. It's kind of like Eeyore, the pessimistic donkey character in Winnie the Pooh. There are some Eeyore Christians out there.

There is hopelessness in their heart. Sometimes this is because things have not gone in the past as they wanted. Prayers were seemingly not answered, or not answered how they wanted. The same issues creep up year after year. They feel disappointed and sometimes in despair.

But the right view of divine providence believes that God is good and He is always working in situations and wants my best for His glory. It was God's kindness through Boaz that propelled Naomi again. If you are in this position look around again in your life and see that God has been working! Therefore, I must look for opportunities in life and seize them, considering them to be possibly gifts of God, even if I have been disappointed in the past. Remember the enemy would want you in despair and not do anything. God would want to put hope in your soul.

The whole book of Ruth is about the providence of God, but notice that it is also full of risk. Ruth leaves her homeland and culture and tags along with a bitter old woman. She then goes out to glean with the risk of a lot of work with little pay as well as the possibility of verbal and physical abuse. Now she goes out at night, getting all dressed up to talk to Boaz while he is sleeping.

Our responsibility in light of God's providence is to seize opportunities regardless of past disappointments.

Think about it for a moment. Do you feel paralyzed by past disappointments? Has despair gripped your soul? If we are going to believe in the providence of God, we go to the Lord with that hurt and

ask Him to help you I have been cast down, but not destroyed. I am down but not out. By faith and by grace, I am going to make progress, but sometimes the progress comes only by rocking the boat a little.

As John Ortberg says, "If you want to walk on water, you have to step out of the boat."

Despite these previous disappointments, allow God's goodness to be a motivator to awaken hope in our heart and to seize opportunities to get them.

Secondly, God provides but we play our part by:

II. Maintaining moral integrity whatever the situation (Ruth 3:6-11).

Let's look at Ruth 3:6-7. Ruth arrives at the threshing floor. From a distance, she watches Boaz laughing, eating and drinking with the servants. Finally, he gets up and calls it a night. Some servants leave, but some spread out and find places to rest for the night. Boaz finds a good spot near the pile of grain, grabs a blanket or a mantle and lays down. Ruth had "happened" to come to Boaz's field (Ruth 2:3) and now it is Boaz who "happened" to lay down at the end of the pile!

She continues to wait, perhaps behind some rocks. She wants to make sure everyone is sleeping before she came out. If she was seen, gossip would spread through Bethlehem like wild fire. Both Boaz's and Ruth's reputations would be ruined. The town would talk about this for years! Ruth's heart must have been racing as she moves to lay at Boaz feet.

Just picture it for a moment. Trembling, she kneels at his feet and slowly without making a sound, draws his blanket back carefully as not to wake him, takes a deep breath and lays down next to him. I wonder at this point if she was like, "What in the world have I gotten myself into?" But she is following Naomi's instructions to the letter so far.

So, she lies there waiting. Hopefully no one will awaken and walk by. Ruth 3:8. It is now the darkest of night, midnight, and the air is getting chillier. The breeze picks up slightly and Boaz feels that his feet are cold. Boaz wakes up and a woman was lying at his feet!

The upright, honorable Israelite suddenly found himself face-to-face with an unknown woman in a secluded corner of the threshing floor. Was this a prostitute? How will Boaz react to this compromising situation? Will he be angry, delighted or embarrassed? With a rough whisper as not to wake anyone he asks, "Who are you?" And she replies, but notice that her words are different than usual.

She doesn't call herself the Moabitess. She says, "servant," but this word is a different word than in [Ruth 2:13](#). There it meant a "laborer," but here it means more like a woman who is eligible and ready for marriage, a little bit higher up the ladder. Then she deviates from Naomi's script. What did Naomi say would happen at this point? Boaz would instruct her on what to do ([Ruth 3:4](#)). However, she takes another risk and asks him to do something very daring.

She says, "Spread the corner of your garment over me for you are a redeemer." This can also be translated as, "Spread your wings over me." In the ancient Near East and still practiced today, was the custom where if a man wanted to propose to a woman, he would take a blanket and throw it over her. This meant that she would come under his protection and it also meant that, "I want you to be under my blanket with me as my wife." This was a picture of close fellowship and intimacy. So what Ruth is proposing here is that Boaz propose to her! Ruth placed herself under the wings of God and now seeks to be under the wings of a husband for protection and security.

She is so bold! She is using his imagery that he used in [Ruth 2:12](#), when Boaz said that Ruth was like a little bird who found refuge under the wings of God. In effect, she is saying, "Answer your own prayer Boaz!" Boaz, you asked that God would protect me under His wings, but you are the means to which God will do so.

What in the world has possessed Ruth? One commentator writes, "Here is a servant demanding that the boss marry her, a Moabite making the demand of an Israelite, a woman making the demand of a man, a poor person making the demand of a rich man. Was this an act of foreigner naïveté, or a daughter-in-law's devotion to her mother-in-law, or another sign of the hidden hand of God? From a natural perspective the scheme was doomed from the beginning as a hopeless gamble, and the responsibility Naomi placed on Ruth was quite unreasonable. But it worked!"[2]

[Ruth 3:10](#). This is how we know there was no sexual activity going on here. Boaz is praying a blessing over Ruth. If there is sexual sin, the last thing you think about is prayer and blessing! Boaz seems flattered and inwardly pleased by this request. He declared her praiseworthy and blessed by God. When he says "this last kind act," he is referring to her willingness to provide Naomi an heir by marrying a redeemer like Boaz. This exceeded "the first," which is her abandoning her homeland and family out of devotion to Naomi.

Boaz was also amazed that Ruth passed up other attractive options. She did not hook up with more eligible younger bachelors, perhaps some who even worked with her in Boaz's field. What Boaz is implying here is that he did not think he was even in her league with all the options out there.

Warmly and tenderly, he reassures her in [Ruth 3:11](#) with a “do not fear.” We also see Boaz’s exemplary character, telling her he will do as she has asked, which means to address the town elders about this situation and work out what needs to be done; for everything to be done correctly. He then adds that this should not be a problem to bring up, for everyone knows her as a “worthy woman.” Notice in [Ruth 2:1](#), Boaz is called a “worthy man.” They are a good match!

In calling her a worthy woman Boaz is saying, “Ruth, your self-sacrifice and commitment (Ruth 1), hard work (Ruth 2) and loyalty to your family (Ruth 3) has demonstrated to all of Bethlehem that you are a woman of high honour.”

What has transpired here so far is remarkable. Boaz and Ruth were thrown into the furnace of temptation with the temperature raised and all the variables set up for disaster and moral failure. They are at a threshing floor, known for prostitution ([Hos. 9:1](#)). It is the time of the judges, where everyone does what is right in their own eyes ([Judges 25:21](#)) and sexual sin was right at the top of the list. It was dark, no one would have known. Everything is in place for disaster, but they stood the course!

Granted Naomi put them in this situation, but they maintained their moral integrity regardless. One of our responsibilities as we wait for God’s providence is that we maintain moral integrity. No matter what you are waiting for, keep your moral integrity.

The providence of God says that God is working for you in advance. If so, we do not need to fall for instant gratification to get there. Do you realize most crimes take place in the dark? In the dark of the night a thief breaks into a home to steal. It is in the dimly lit areas that mugging take place. Character is what you are in the dark when no one is looking. Boaz and Ruth maintained their integrity in the dark. What they were in the dark, revealed what they truly were: a man and woman of true character. The darkness is not a time to take a chance, but to show our character. Let us pray to the Lord to give us consistency of character that is unaffected by our circumstances!

So we play our part by seizing opportunities despite the past, maintaining moral integrity whatever the situation and lastly,

III. Trust God no matter what ([Ruth 3:12-18](#)).

Let’s get back to the story. Everything is going as planned. However, when you seize opportunities and maintain integrity throughout, it doesn’t that mean that it will be smooth sailing. Look at [Ruth](#)

3:12. Remember the redeemer was the nearest relative of a deceased person who would be willing to marry his wife, buy his land and have children to carry on the family name.

Just when the wedding bells seemed to sound, Boaz reveals a disconcerting fact. First he agrees with Ruth's petition, that he fits the qualifications for a kinsman redeemer.

But Boaz wants Ruth to be properly redeemed. Boaz says that there was another, a person yet unnamed, who had a closer kinship relationship to Elimelech than Boaz did. As a result, he had a prior right to serve as a kinsman redeemer. So he is saying that he is *a* kinsman redeemer, not *the* kinsman redeemer.

Oh no! Will Boaz lose Ruth after all? What a twist! Naomi, who complained there were no helpers (Ruth 1:11, 21), had one too many! The question then arises, did Naomi not know of this relative? Or did she think that since Boaz was a guaranteed good man and treated Ruth with so much abundant generosity despite her background, that it was a better shot for Ruth and Boaz to be together than this relative? We do not know for sure.

Look at Ruth 3:13. What he is doing by telling her to stay there was that he was protecting her. There were lurking thieves out there and probably drunk harvesters around in a celebratory mood. Besides, she is all dressed up! It was not right to send her back home like this. So he tells her to remain there and in the morning, he will sort this out.

He will do things the right way or let God punish him! As a man of God, Boaz wanted to do things the way of God than try to go around it. He lays his personal preference aside. Selflessness seems to characterize both of them.

Under the Mosaic law, if the kinsman redeemer did not want to take the responsibility, he can waive the right and the offer goes to the next one on the list, who in this case, was Boaz. Boaz will have to take this matter to him first thing in the morning. Will he want to waive his right? We will have to wait and see.

Now before the sun even rose, Ruth jumps up. One can imagine what people will say if they see her with Boaz that morning. She gets ready to leave and Boaz gets up and feels the same way. He wants to protect both of their reputations. Even though nothing happened that night, he does not want to even appear as if something did. But good old Boaz cannot leave her without a parting gift. Look at Ruth 3:15. We are not sure how much exactly "six measures of barley" is, but the fact that he had

to put it on her, either on her head or sling it around, on her shoulder, means that it was a generous amount of food.

Why this gesture? Probably a couple of purposes lie behind it. First of all, if anyone saw Ruth coming home so early, they will assume she was working overtime and bringing home food. This will explain any questions from the townspeople. Secondly, look at [Ruth 3:16](#).

Ruth comes home and we can imagine Naomi as another person who probably had not slept all night. She must have been praying, pacing, looking out the window, worrying and hoping. The first thing she says is, "So what happened?! Tell me everything!" Ruth tells Naomi that Boaz did not want her to go home empty-handed and that was the reason for the large amount of food. In other words, Boaz is saying, "Here is a sign that I am going to do what I have said."

But Naomi also learned of the obstacle from Ruth. She ends [Ruth 3:18](#) with a statement of hope, though mingled at the same time with suspense and fear. Just when Naomi thought everything was going according to plan, she is left once again having to trust in the providence of God.

There will always be obstacles in our path. We are not sent to lay down on a bed of roses, but to walk on a path of thorns. But when we do, we can be sure God will give us the good shoes of faith. In the beginning, it is blue skies. Perhaps it is a new job, a pay rise, or a new relationship. But then setbacks, opposition, unexpected obstacles all come in. Such is the problem of life. David never said there would not be valleys, but that "even though I walk through the valley...you are with me" ([Ps. 23: 4](#)). Jesus never said there will be no troubles, but "take heart I have overcome the world" ([John 16:33](#)).

A preacher said this: "A setback is just a set-up for a comeback." We are going to get stones thrown on our path, but they can either be stumbling blocks or stepping stones. We have to decide. I will not stumble over this, but use this to step a little bit closer to the Lord. A bend in the road is not the end of the road.

Naomi did all she could, but it is the Lord who will get the final say. Many are the plans of man, but it is the Lord who guides our steps, the Scriptures say. In other words, write your plans in pencil, but give God the rubber.

Conclusion

When we talk about God's providence, it does not negate the fact that God expects us to know and act on our responsibilities. When the boats and helicopters come, we must take them. For some

strange reason, God works things together using our choices and risks that we take. If we want to see Him work, we need to take some calculated risks despite previous disappointments. But no matter what we do, we must maintain our moral integrity and after we do all that we can, we will still face obstacles and must trust God regardless.