

Ruth (Part 2) - Where there is Loyal Love, there God is also

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

“A society grows great when old people plant trees in whose shade they will never sit” (Greek Proverb)

Ruth is a story about God’s providence through the loyal love of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. Because Ruth is David’s great grandmother and in the line that led to Jesus, we see that Ruth is a story about God working through ordinary things.

Providence is the opposite of Macbeth’s tragic statement that life is a tale ‘told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’ Providence means that history is where a loving God works out His purposes.

Ruth: Accidentally Under Yahweh’s Wings

In a well-known modern parable, a drowning man prays for help. Two boats and a helicopter offer him help, but he doesn’t take it because he believes God will save him. He gets to the gates of heaven and asks Peter why he wasn’t saved. Peter tells him, didn’t you see the boats and helicopter?

Sometimes, reading the Bible leaves us feeling like God’s ways are only in the thunderbolts and lightning and the very very frightening.

But Ruth is a story about ‘coincidences’. In Ruth 2:3 we are told she ‘just so happened’ to be in Boaz’s field. Of course, this is not a ‘coincidence’. Boaz later tells her, in Ruth 2:12, that she has been under the Lord’s wings.

Ruth is also a story about someone who does not belong becoming very important. One of the most repeated words in Ruth 2 is ‘Moabite’. Moabites were hated by Israelites.

In the novel *No Country for Old Men*, an aging sheriff says “I always figured when I got older, God would sorta come into my life somehow. And he didn’t. I don’t blame him. If I was him, I would have the same opinion of me that he does.”¹

Many of us disqualify ourselves or other people because of our gender, age, social class, or race. But God doesn’t. Ruth becomes one of the most important people in history. She is anything but an accident.

Naomi: The Story Isn’t Over

Naomi’s story is of great suffering. She could say with novelist Kurt Vonnegut that “Life is no way to treat an animal.”²

¹ Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*

² Kurt Vonnegut, *Jailbird*.

The text gives us no reasons for Naomi's suffering. She blames God, but the storyteller doesn't give us reasons for her suffering.

Jesus was asked about someone's suffering in John 9. When seeing a man born blind His disciples asked: "who sinned, this man or his parents?"

Jesus' response is often translated "Neither this man nor his parents sinned...but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." (John 9:3 NIV)

But many scholars argue that this is not an appropriate translation. They would opt for: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But so that the works of God might be displayed in him, it is necessary that we do the deeds of the one who sent me while it is day."³

Jesus turns a 'why did this happen' into a 'what can we do?'

In a world broken by sin, some thing just happens. Finding reasons for every suffering is not a Christian response, asking how we can help is.

Naomi's suffering has her feeling insignificant. Andrew Solomon wrote on grief and depression: "Depression is the flaw in love. To be creatures who love, we must be creatures who can despair at what we lose, and depression is the mechanism of that despair. ...Love forsakes us from time to time, and we forsake love. In depression, the meaninglessness of every enterprise and every emotion, the meaninglessness of life itself, becomes self-evident. The only feeling left in this loveless state is insignificance."⁴

Naomi is young enough to be helping Ruth, to search for a husband for herself and Ruth, and to do much more. But she is stuck in her grief.

Naomi challenges the way we think providence should feel. God is working through her life, but she can barely get out of bed.

The storyteller does not change her name like asked (see Ruth 1:20-21). Because the storyteller knows her *story isn't over*.

Mother Teresa was known to have suffered a deep spiritual depression even though she was changing Calcutta with her ministry. Many of my former friends in ministry and professors have suffered long seasons of darkness, even while having incredibly fruitful ministries.

God doesn't need us to feel a certain way to be at work in our lives. The cross shows us God can be present to suffering and pain.

Providence means the story isn't over, God is still at work.

³ See Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John*. 272.

⁴ Solomon, *The Noonday Demon*

Boaz: Where there is Loyal Love, There God is Also

In a lesser-known story by Tolstoy, an old cobbler has a vision that Jesus will visit him. As he waits for Jesus to show up, he ends up showing kindness to impoverished people. At the end of the day, those people step out from the shadows and say 'it was I', and he reads Matthew 25:45: "inasmuch as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me."

Tolstoy called that story *Where there is Love, There God is Also*.

Boaz shows us this kind of love—he allows Ruth to drink from a jar with Israelites as a gentile, he serves her dinner rather than being served, he asks his men to leave grain behind for her intentionally, and he protects her from abuse.

For Boaz, this is covenant faithfulness. As a follower of the Lord, he is called to look out for sojourners, widows, and orphans. But he goes far above and beyond.

For those of us who want to see God at work, the advice from the book of Ruth is this: love, love lavishly, ridiculously, and extravagantly. Loyal love propels these people into history, it is the part they played in providence.

Three questions to consider:

Who is your Boaz?

Who has shown favor to you and wants to love you, and will you let them? Boaz warns Ruth not to 'glean in other fields' (Ruth 2:8). Sometimes we spurn God's work by not *letting people love us*.

Who is your Ruth?

Ruth says she found 'favor' (Ruth 2:10). God has worked in history by drawing people to each other. Who do you feel drawn towards to help? Who can you show extravagant love to?

What can you do for Naomi?

Rather than seek to give answers, what can you do for the people suffering in your life?

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some 'coincidences' that have really changed your life?
2. How do you expect it needs to look for God to work in your life?
3. What are some things that make you feel unworthy of being part of God's plan? What are some things that make you think other people are unworthy?
4. What have you been taught about how it is supposed to feel for God to be present?
5. Who needs your love right now?
6. Read Ruth 2 slowly. Given all that's been discussed, how could God be speaking to you in this text?