

## RUTH 2 “HE HAS NOT STOPPED SHOWING HIS KINDNESS”

Imagine with me, a winter day. The landscape is bare, the air is cold, and the wind is biting.

You must travel across Indiana to a small town for some business, and as you drive home along state roads, the air soon becomes white with snow. But this is not just light snow. This is a blizzard of snow.

You do not know the road well, but even if you did, it would do you little good, because now you cannot even see the road.

You are soon off the road and into a ditch. You cannot drag your car out, and no one can see you or anything else well enough to come drag you out.

No, the cell phone does not work.

What do you do? If you stay in your car for too long, you will eventually freeze to death. But you cannot turn around, and you cannot go forward, so all you can do is watch the light turn to darkness.

I paint this picture, to stir our minds about our situation as people.

You have been where you have been. It may be your fault, or it may be someone else's fault, but the past leads to the present, and the past is often a mess, so the present is a mess.

You have chosen a relationship that is destroying you. You have spoken with anger, and lost your job. Your cruelty and manipulation have injured or even devastated the people you say you love.

Or maybe you have been wronged. You are the victim of injustice, or ill treatment, or even abuse.

There you are. Darkness is falling. Where do you go? What do you do?

You might assume God is on your side. But what if he is not?

You might wonder whether God is on your side. And what if he is not?

Last week, we began our walk through the short book of Ruth, by seeing how Jesus Christ enters into a world of bitterness. After the death of her husband and sons, Naomi cries, “Call me bitter.” But even in the bitterness that Naomi feels, God is blazing a sovereign trail to the Savior Jesus - the One who has come to suffer bitterness, that we may have abundant help in bitterness today, and abundant hope of freedom from bitterness forever.

Yet Jesus does not just enter a world of bitterness. He enters a world of lostness. He enters a world where people suffer pain from the past, hurt in the present, and despair for the future. He enters a world where we just do not know what to do, or where to turn.

What happens in this chapter of the book of Ruth? Let's capture the start of this chapter with words from verse 3: SHE FINDS HERSELF.

Ruth finds herself. We use that phrase in a unique way in our culture. We say, “She went off to find herself,” and we are talking about someone going off to Europe or Africa or wherever to discover “who they are.”

That's not what the writer of Ruth is describing here! “She finds herself” describes Ruth's situation.

So what is that situation? Where does she find herself? SHE IS LOST.

Several times in the book, the writer refers to Ruth as “Ruth the Moabitess.” That's a reminder that Ruth is from another culture.

She has come to Israel with Naomi, and as we learned last week, she faces poverty and uncertainty.

Here is the plan: Ruth has arrived at the time of the barley harvest, so she will pick up the “leftovers” and provide food for her and Naomi. Ruth will “glean.”

This was allowed and even encouraged under the Old Testament law. If you were harvesting a field, you were not allowed to harvest to the edge of your land. As well, you were not to go back and pick up what the harvesters left behind. The edges and the “leftovers” were for the poor to glean.

It's a good plan, but here is the problem. Where should Ruth go? She is in a new land. Before her are countless fields. The boundaries between them are not well-marked, except with maybe a few stones.

So here she is, with all of these fields before her, and she does not know where she is going, or even when she might wander from one person's property and onto another person's property.

To make things worse, the harvesters would sometimes break the law and not allow gleaners. Or if they allowed them, they would not respect them.

Once again, enter the story. Ruth is a widow. She has no husband. She has no opportunity to “get a job.” She has no government benefits for widows. She is utterly desperate. She is completely vulnerable. She must find food to eat, but she is in a strange, foreign, possibly hostile land.

She is lost. BUT GOD IS NOT.

Listen again to verse 3: “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.”

“As it turned out...she found herself.”

How does that happen? Is it “chance”? Is it some unknown, unknowable force we might call “fate”?

Is it something we call “coincidence”?

No! What have we already learned from the book of Ruth? The people here know that the hand of the Lord is upon events. This is not chance, or fate, or coincidence. As one writer writes, this phrase “points to the truth that men do not control events, but that the hand of God is behind them as He works His purpose out.”

Why is Ruth in the field of Boaz? She is in that field, because that is precisely where the sovereign God of the universe wants her to be.

She is lost. But God is not. He knows where he is, and he knows where she is, and he knows where Boaz is, and he knows what his sovereign plan is, and he will order events, for his purposes, exactly as he pleases.

Do you believe this?

I remember a discussion in high school, with the man God called to lead the little youth group at our little church. He was trying to teach us that God’s sovereignty extends to everything.

We had the ability to be smart-alecks, so once of us asked, “Do you mean God is sovereign over whether or not I have a hot dog for dinner tonight?”

He said, “Yes.”

Is God sovereign over even hot dogs? Yes! I don’t claim to know why he cares about hot dogs, or how he will use the hot dog I eat tonight as part of his sovereign purposes. But I would declare to you that the testimony of the Bible is that God is indeed sovereign over hot dogs, and all things in his world.

We struggle with this.

One objection we make is, “I don’t see this.” How could God be sovereign even over hot dogs?

We don’t see God’s sovereign control over what we eat, or over a million other details and events of our lives. What we see is what we do, and what others do. We choose to eat hot dogs.

But just because we cannot always see the hand of the Lord, does not mean the hand of the Lord is not there. We believe this by faith, not by sight. In his Word, God has said he is sovereign. We believe him.

Another objection we make is, “Then we are not free.” If God is truly sovereign, then how can we be free?

It depends on how you define “free.”

If by “free” you mean, utterly independent, absolutely unfettered, then we are not free. Even with hot dogs, I can want hot dogs, but I will only be able to have one, if I can get one from the refrigerator or at the store. If I can’t, then I can proclaim my freedom to eat hot dogs all I want, but I will still go hungry.

If by “free” you mean, “free to act according to our nature,” then we are free, even as God is sovereign. I am free to will a hot dog for myself, if that is what I want. My nature is to like hot dogs, so I will want to eat one.

Yet my freedom is never bigger than God’s sovereignty. He will often use my “free” choices to carry out his sovereign purposes. That’s how amazing he is! But my freedom is never greater than the sovereignty of our great God.

I ask again: do you believe this?

Do you believe this, in big situations? Especially when it is hard, we want to resist the idea of God’s sovereignty. But as we learned last week, we are not ruled by “chance,” “fate,” or “coincidence” in even the bitterness. God is sovereign, even over the bitterness.

Do you believe this in daily situations? What about the “chance” meeting with the old friend? What about that intensely frustrating situation? What about the simple joys of each day? They are from the hand of the sovereign Lord, who rules his creatures, for his perfect purposes.

She is lost. But God is not. Ruth finds herself exactly where God wants her to be.

Yet is that good or bad? We wonder, as we ponder the bitterness that we have already tasted in this book. What will happen to Ruth in this barley field where she finds herself?

**SHE FINDS FAVOR.** And that is very good news, for her, and for us.

From whom does Ruth find favor? First, **FROM BOAZ.**

The writer of Ruth tells us that Boaz is a “man of standing.” We are not fully sure what that means. He could be wealthy. He could be a military man. He could be a morally strong person. He could be all three. He is certainly a godly man, as we learn when we see him asking for God’s blessing as he greets his harvesters.

But how will he treat Ruth? He knows something of her. He is impressed by her treatment of Naomi, through the bitterness they have faced.

Yet will he be kind to Ruth? He could just choose to let her glean and ignore her. But instead, he shows her favor.

We read of his first favors in verses 8 and 9.

\* He invites her to stay and keep gleaning in his field. She has been an outsider. Now she will have the privilege of gleaning from his bounty.

\* He protects her from the harvesters. If the gleaner gets too close to the harvesters, they might push the gleaners away - even roughly. But Boaz tells the men not to touch her.

\* He supplies her needs. Harvesting and gleaning are hard work. If Ruth has to take time off to get water, she will glean less. But Boaz permits Ruth to drink from the water jars filled by the men who work for him.

Favor upon favor upon favor.

But there is more. We read of his next favors in verses 14 to 16.

\* He welcomes her to his table - with bread and grain. What favor for a hungry woman!

\* He ensures her success. The harvesters would gather the bundles of barley into sheaves, and then the gleaners could come behind and gather all they could, when the harvesters were finished.

But Ruth is allowed to gather, even before the harvesters are finished gathering the bundles. Boaz even tells them to take a few stalks from the bundles and leave them for her.

Favor upon favor upon favor. She could not expect this. She could not demand this. When she is done for the day, she has gathered more barley than she or Naomi could have imagined.

She finds favor, from Boaz.

Yet she also finds favor, FROM THE LORD.

As we read this story about people, we might think this story is only about people. But it is really about God. Naomi reminded us of this last week. Now she will do it again.

Naomi asks where Ruth has gleaned. When Ruth tells her, Naomi rejoices in the Lord. "The Lord bless him!...He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead."

"Kindness." The Hebrew word here is "hesed." It is the great covenant word of the Old Testament.

The covenant is God's relationship with the people of Israel. "Hesed" is a way of describing God's love for his people, and his faithfulness to his people.

Naomi has wondered. Last week, we read of her crying, "Call me bitter." But today, the bitterness dissolves, as she recognizes God's covenant love and faithfulness for her, and even for the ones who have died. Because God has been faithful to her, he has been faithful even to them.

"He has not stopped showing his kindness." She rejoices because of the abundance of what Ruth has gathered. But is that all?

No. Listen to the rest of her words in verse 20: "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers."

A kinsman-redeemer is one who fulfills his obligation to his family, by doing what he must do, to bless his family. He is the relative of the widow, who will provide for that widow by marrying that widow and having children with her, to carry on the family name.

This seems strange to us. But remember the world of these women. The family name is important. The need for support is important. The idea of the kinsman-redeemer was God's way of providing for the needs and the name of a woman who had lost her husband.

Yes, bitterness is from the Lord. But, yes, blessing is from the Lord. Ruth is lost. But she has found the favor of Boaz, and of God.

As Boaz declares in verse 12, Ruth has rested under the wings of the sovereign God of all. Through faith, Ruth sees the favor of the sovereign Lord upon her life. From Boaz, and more importantly from God, Ruth sees favor upon favor upon favor.

So I ask as I did last week: what does this have to do with Christmas? How are we walking along the trail to Jesus?

Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of David, the Son of Ruth, enters into a world of bitterness, and he enters into a world of lostness.

But with what does he enter? Does he enter only to judge? Does he come, only to condemn?

No. He enters with "hesed." He enters a world of lost people, with kindness and favor. Kindness upon kindness. Favor upon favor.

In the cold darkness of that lonely road somewhere in Indiana, you see a light. It is a flashlight. The man carrying the light says to come with him.

You trudge for what seems forever, and you are cold and soaked by the time you arrive at the door of a home.

You would be content with the chance to make a phone call, but you have entered at supper time, and the man and his family invite you to join them in their evening meal.

The food is delightful - better than hot dogs! Let's say hot chicken and dumplings, steaming green beans, fresh bread, and warm apple pie.

The company is delightful. You know you are in a place of love, respect, and laughter.

How far have you come? You have gone from death to life. You have gone from lostness to safety. In your desperation, in your vulnerability, in your mess, you have found favor. And it is rich. It is glorious.

This is what Jesus Christ has done. He has entered the lostness of lost people in a lost world, and he showers them with the kindness of the Almighty God of the universe.

“Here”, he says. “You are lost because of your sin against God. I give you forgiveness, for I have taken your sins on myself, on the cross.

“Here,” he says. “You are lost in a world of bitterness. I give you help, for I am mighty to help, in your time of need.

“I give you peace, for your tortured soul.

“I give you wisdom, for your overburdened mind.

“I give you strength, for your weak body.

“I give you joy, for your heavy heart.”

Favor upon favor upon favor. This is the good news of Christmas! Jesus Christ has come to pour out the favor of God upon lost, broken, helpless, and hopeless people like Naomi and Ruth and you and me.

Where do you find yourself this morning?

Do you know how lost you are?

Some of you do not know. You may think you are a little off course, but you may also think you are generally an okay person.

You need to know how lost you are. You need to know that you are in a ditch before the holy God of all, and you cannot get yourself out. Until you get out of that ditch, you will be on the road to eternal death.

Some of you know how lost you are, all too well. You know what you have done. You know the wrong roads you have followed. You know how the sin of others has driven you into that ditch. You are in that ditch, and you despair of ever getting out.

Do you know how lost you are?

Do you know how Jesus finds you with his favor?

The favor of God is not reluctantly given. The favor of God is not rationed out, piecemeal. The favor of God is not just for some people.

God’s favor is abundant. God’s favor is overflowing. God’s favor is like that banquet in the snowstorm, where lost people are welcomed to a joyous feast, all by the mercy of our God. This favor is all ours, through faith in Jesus - the Son of this kinsman-redeemer named Boaz.

Do you know this? Do you know this in your heart? Do you know this, so that it reaches even to the deepest places of your soul?

We must savor this. I recently heard a pastor say that in Jesus, “I am God’s personal concern.”

He is personally concerned for me. He has poured out favor upon favor, and he continues to do so, even when I feel bitter and lost in this world.

I mourn. I am God’s personal concern. I have the favor of his comfort.

I worry. I am God’s personal concern. I have the favor of his peace.

I am confused. I am God’s personal concern. I have the favor of his wisdom.

I tremble at the mess I have made. I am God’s personal concern. I have the favor of his forgiveness.

I suffer injustice. I am God’s personal concern. I have the favor of his help.

We must share this. The past is a mess. The present is a mess. The thought of the future brings despair.

But God gives favor. He blesses the lost, by finding them with his favor. He blesses the found, by reminding them of his favor. How we need to share this! How this must ooze from our ministry here, and from our lives before a lot of lost people!

“He has not stopped showing his kindness.” When we see we are lost, and we know we cannot go back, and we do not know how to go forward, this is the cry of our hearts and our lips, “He has not stopped showing his kindness.” He has not stopped showing his kindness, because Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of David, the Son of Ruth...is here.

Begone unbelief, my Savior is near  
And for my relief, will surely appear:  
By faith let me wrestle, with God in the storm,  
And help me my Savior, the faith to adorn.