**TAKE REFUGE UNDER GOD’S WINGS**

March 12, 2017

Ruth 2:1-23

Key Verse 2:12 “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.”

In chapter 1 of Ruth, God’s hand fell hard upon Naomi and her family. A famine in Judah, a move to Moab, the death of her husband, the marriage of her two sons to foreign wives, the death of her sons. One blow after another caused Naomi to say (1:13, 20), “The Lord’s hand has turned against me . . . the Almighty has made my life very bitter.” In fact, she is so oppressed by God’s bitter providence in her life that she cannot see any of the signs of hope as they start to appear. She knows there is a God. She knows he is Almighty and rules in the national and personal affairs of men. And she knows that he has dealt bitterly with her. Her life is tragic. What she has forgotten is that in all the bitter experiences of his children, God is plotting for their glory. And if we would believe this and remember it, we would not be as blind as Naomi seemed to be when God begins to reveal his grace. In chapter 1, after tragedy, God lifts the famine and opens a way home for Naomi. He gives her an amazingly devoted and loving daughter-in-law to accompany her. And he preserves a guardian-redeemer of Naomi’s husband who will someday marry Ruth and preserve Naomi’s line. But Naomi sees none of this. At the end of the chapter, she says to the townspeople of Bethlehem, “I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me?” So Ruth and bitter Naomi settle in Bethlehem. In chapter 2 the mercy of God becomes so obvious that even Naomi will recognize it.

In verses 1–7 we meet Boaz, we see the character of Ruth, and we sense a very merciful providence behind this scene. Boaz, we learn, is a relative of Elimelek, Naomi’s long-deceased husband. Immediately we realize that things are not nearly as bleak as Naomi suggested back in chapter 1 where she gave the impression that there was no one for Ruth and Orpah to marry to carry on the line of their husbands. For the person reading this story the first time, Boaz is like a bright crack in the cloud of bitterness hanging over Naomi. It is going to get bigger and bigger.

For example, verse 1 says that he is a man of standing. But more important than that, verse 4 shows that he is a man of God. Why else would the story-teller pause to record the way Boaz greeted his servants? “Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, ‘The Lord be with you!’ ‘The Lord bless you!’ they answered.” If you want to know a man’s relation to God, you need to find out how godly his everyday life is. Evidently Boaz was such a godly man that his farming business and his relationship to his employees were God-centered. He greeted them with God. These were more than just being nice.

Besides meeting Boaz in verses 1–7, we see the character of Ruth which is going to be very crucial in what this chapter intends to teach.

First, we see Ruth’s initiative to care for her mother-in-law. Notice in verse 2, Naomi does not command Ruth to get out and work. Ruth says, "Let me go to the fields, and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone.” Ruth has committed herself to Naomi with amazing devotion and she takes the initiative to work and provide for her. Ruth would go out into the fields and pick up any of the harvest that escaped the harvest workers. Unlike today’s harvesting, which uses high tech machines to pick up absolutely every last kernel of grain on the first pass, the harvests of those days were done by hand, and a certain percentage of the grain was left behind. In fact, the Lord commanded the Israelites not to go over a harvest a second time to pick up the remainder, so that it would be left for the poor and the animals to eat (Dt. 24:19-22). Though gleaning was protected in the law, gleaners were on the lowest end of the social ladder, on a par with the wild animals. They had to keep their distance from the harvesters, and they had to fight over the scraps with other gleaners. And Ruth was a young foreign woman. She could easily be taken advantage of by the male harvesters. But Ruth went out by faith and sought to find a safe place where she could glean for herself and Naomi.

Second, we see Ruth’s humility. She knows how to take initiative without being presumptuous. In verse 7 the servants report to Boaz how she had approached them that morning. She had said, “Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.” She does not demand a handout. She does not presume the right even to glean. All she wants to do is to gather up the leftovers after the harvesters are done and she asks permission even to do that. She is like another foreign woman who came to Jesus and said, “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” to which Jesus responded by praising her faith. Ruth knows how to take initiative, but she is not pushy or presumptuous but meek and humble.

Third, we see her diligence. She is an amazing worker. Verse 7 continues, “She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.” Verse 17 goes on to say that she gleaned until evening and then before she went home, she beat out what she gleaned, measured it, and took it home to Naomi. There is no doubt that the writer wants us to admire and copy Ruth. She takes initiative to care for her destitute mother-in-law. She is humble and meek and does not put herself forward presumptuously. And she works hard from sunup to sundown. Initiative. Lowliness. Diligence. Worthy traits.

But before we leave verses 1–7, did you sense a merciful providence behind all this? Notice verse 3: “So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.” “As it turned out”? You don’t have to write your theology in every line. Sometimes it is good to leave something ambiguous to give your reader a chance to fill in the blank. The answer can be given later. It will be. In fact, Naomi, with her grand theology of God’s sovereignty, is the one who will give the answer. The answer is God—the merciful providence of God guiding Ruth as she gleans. Ruth happened to come to Boaz’s field because God is gracious and sovereign even when he is silent. As Proverbs 16:9 says, “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.”

Now in verses 8 and 9 Boaz approaches Ruth and shows her great kindness, even though she is a foreigner. He provides food by telling her to work in his field and stay close behind the women who work for him. He provides protection by telling the young men not to molest her (9). And he provides for her thirst by telling her to drink from what the men have drawn. So all of Boaz’s wealth and godliness begin to turn for Ruth’s welfare. Now we come to the most important interchange in the chapter—verses 10–13. Ruth raises a question which turns out to be very profound. It is one that we all need to ask God. Look at verse 10. “At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, ‘Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?” Ruth had no thought that she deserved such grace! She knew that she was a foreigner, a Moabitess and one of Israel’s ancient enemies. It doesn’t mean that she had done nothing good. But she knew that whatever she had done, it couldn’t have earned her this much kindness. This is the definition of grace. It is kindness and mercy that far exceeds anything we could have earned for ourselves.

She is very different from most people today. We expect kindness and are astonished and resentful if we don’t get our rights. But Ruth expresses her sense of unworthiness by falling on her face and bowing to the ground. Proud people don’t say thanks. Humble people are made even more humble by being treated graciously. Grace is not intended to lift us out of lowliness. It is intended to make us happy in God.

Ruth asks why Boaz has treated her so graciously. Verses 11-12 are crucial: 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 richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” When Ruth asks why she is being shown grace, Boaz does not answer: Grace has no conditions. He answers her question, “Why?” by saying, “Because you have loved Naomi so much that you were willing to leave father and mother to serve her in a strange land.”

What Ruth had done for Naomi had become well known. Her kindness and faithfulness to Naomi didn’t benefit anybody else. But it caught Boaz’s attention because of its purity and generosity. He was generous to her simply because she had been generous and mindful toward one of God’s weakest and most vulnerable people, though it came at great cost to herself. And Boaz understood the spiritual reason behind Ruth’s sacrifice. She had done all this in order to come and take refuge under God’s wings of grace. She valued God’s care and protection above anything that her family, her people or her gods could give her. She preferred whatever she could glean from the Lord’s harvest than having a harvest of her own in her native land of Moab. Only those who know the value of God’s mercy and grace can make such a decision of faith. Psalm 84:10 reads, “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of our God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.” Ruth had chosen to be a doorkeeper in the house of God. And Boaz, as God’s servant, was thankful and honored her decision.

Look at verse 12 again. “May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” 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. The implication of verse 12 is that God will reward Ruth because she has sought refuge under his wings. This is a common teaching in the Old Testament. For example, Psalm 57:1 says, “Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me, for in you I take refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Notice the word “for.” “Have mercy on me for in you I take refuge.” Why should God show mercy to Ruth? Because she has sought refuge under his wings. She has counted his protection better than all others. She has set her heart on God for hope and joy. And when a person does that, God’s honor is at stake and he will be merciful.

So now back to Ruth’s question in verse 10, “Why have I found such favor?” The answer is that she has taken refuge under the wings of God and that this has given her the freedom and desire to leave home and love Naomi. She has not earned mercy from God or Boaz. She is not their employee. They are not paying her wages for her work. On the contrary, she has honored them by admitting her need for their work and simply taking refuge in their generosity. This is the message of the gospel in the Old Testament and the New Testament. God will have mercy on anyone (Palestinian or Israelite or Canadian) who humbles himself like Ruth and takes refuge under the wings of God. Jesus said in Matthew 23:37, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” All the Pharisees had to do was to take refuge under the wings of Jesus. Stop justifying themselves. Stop relying on themselves. Stop glorifying themselves. But they would not. Ruth was not their model. No falling on their face before Jesus. No bowing down. No astonishment at grace. Don’t be like the Pharisees. Be like Ruth. God is not an employer looking for employees. He is an Eagle looking for people who will take refuge under his wings. He is looking for people who will leave father and mother and homeland or anything else that may hold us back from a life of love under the wings of Jesus.

Look at verse 13. “‘May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord,’ she said. ‘You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.” May God raise up many young men and women in this generation who know the true value of serving God and coming under his wings of grace!

Let’s end by getting back to Naomi briefly. Boaz gives Ruth all she can eat for lunch. She works till sundown. She returns to Naomi and gives her the leftovers from lunch and all the grain (17–19). She tells her what happened with Boaz, and in verse 20 Naomi’s theology of God’s sovereignty serves her well. She says, “The Lord bless him! He has not stopped showing kindness to the living and the dead.” The Lord’s kindness has not forsaken the living (Naomi and Ruth) or the dead (Elimelek and Mahlon). It was the Lord who stopped the famine. It was the Lord who bound Ruth to Naomi in love. It was the Lord who preserved Boaz for Ruth. Ruth did not just happen to come to Boaz’s field. The light of God’s love has finally broken through bright enough for Naomi to see. The Lord is kind. He is good to all who take refuge under his wings. So let us fall on our faces, bow before the Lord, confess our unworthiness, take refuge under the wings of God, and be astonished at his grace.