

God's Providence or Coincidence

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[0 : 0 0] So keep your Bibles open to Roof Chapter 2 if you can. And you should have grabbed an outline on the way in. And if you did, and look at the top of the outline, you'll see a number of phrases there.

And I suppose if you cast your mind back to conversations you've had, it's not hard to imagine how these phrases often come together in a string of sentences.

So let me give you an example. I was walking down the road one day, and it just so happened that I bumped into an old friend.

One thing led to another. And the next thing you know, I found myself sitting next to Rod Laver at the Australian Open, men's tennis finals.

Not very realistic, but possible. I'll try something like this, maybe. I was surfing the internet one day, and it just so happened that I recognized the contact person on a job ad.

[1 : 0 4] I made contact just to say hi. But before you know it, one thing led to another. And the next thing you know, I've landed a job in London.

All right. None of those are very realistic. But you can see that these sort of things do happen, don't they, in your life. And often when we do, when it does, we tend to ask ourselves, is this just luck or coincidence or fate?

Or is it something we can attribute to God? Now, I know that even for some of us as Christians, we might even deliberately look up for these things as signs of God's will and blessing for us.

We take it to be indicators of what we ought to be doing. You know, ah, so that means I need to take this job or this is the person I need to marry or whatever. Go into ministry.

Well, I'll get back to that question in a while. But as we continue to look at Ruth's story today, we may be prompted to ask the same question.

[2 : 0 5] Is what's happening the result of God's providence or simply mere coincidence? Now, remember where we left off last Sunday? Ruth and Naomi returned to Judah just in time for the harvest.

And immediately in the first verse of this chapter, we are given another piece of information. So look there. It says, now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimenek, whose name was Boaz.

So now we discover that Naomi has relatives in Judah after all. And Boaz was even a man of some standing. But for now, we don't know what that means for Naomi.

Soon, however, we see yet another just-so-happens moment. So Ruth says to Naomi, let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind it. Anyone in whose eyes I find favor.

And Naomi said, go ahead, my daughter. So she went and entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, or to use my phrase, it just so happened, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.

[3 : 13] Now, if you read the Old Testament, there are laws about gleaning. They were provision for the poor or foreigner in Israel. It allowed them to glean or gather what others had left behind in the field.

It was legislated generosity, if you like. The owner was not allowed to double back and sweep up or pick up anything that he had dropped. This way, the disadvantage could help themselves.

It's not dissimilar to many of the charities today that we have, like Second Bite, where food that you don't sell at the supermarket, which they first try to sell still by reducing the price. But then after that, they give it to the poor, don't they?

Or you see some of these bakeries that give away their bread at the end of the day because you're not supposed to sell it again tomorrow. But of course, in those days, not everyone obeyed the laws in reality.

Remember, this is the time of the judges, where everyone did as they saw fit. So for Ruth, there was a risk of actually going into any field, any old field, because she could be confronted with someone who didn't obey the law and then be treated in a nasty way.

[4 : 26] Well, it just so happened that unbeknownst to her or Naomi, she chose Boaz's field. And it just so happened that Boaz turned up to that field that day.

So we keep reading. Just then, Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters. The Lord be with you, he said. The Lord bless you, they answered. Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, Who does that young woman belong to?

The overseer replied, She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters. She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.

So of all the fields that Ruth could have chosen, it was Boaz's. And of all the days she could have done this, it was the day that Boaz came to his field. And of all the people that Boaz could have taken notice of, and for an owner like him, it was unlikely he would take any notice at all, he took notice of Ruth.

So can you see that one thing is leading to another, isn't it? And in a society where everyone does as they saw fit, it just so happened that Boaz was a law-abiding Israelite.

[5 : 48] And more than that, in fact, he was not just law-abiding, but he displayed God's character of generosity as well. Verse 8, as we see. 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 the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I've told the men not to lay a hand on you, and whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars that the men have filled.

And so we pause here to reflect on the title of the sermon. What are we to make of all this? Is this mere coincidence, or God's providence?

And I want to suggest that I think how we answer is very much based on our prior beliefs and convictions. So if you don't believe in God, then these will just be a series of coincidences to you.

You may think it slightly unusual to have them sort of leading one to another, but there's nothing particularly supernatural about any of them, as though you could then say God was intervening directly to make it happen.

[7 : 01] But if, like Naomi last week, you believe in God's sovereignty, then all of this is happening because of God's hand. Just as last week, Naomi rightly recognizes the Lord afflicted her, and so in this chapter, later on she will say that she recognizes that the Lord is working to bless her.

And you know, that's the same for us as Christians. If we believe in God's sovereignty, then we ought to believe that everything goes on in this world, or in our lives, only as a result of God's hand.

Nothing happens apart from what God is doing. And so I want to make the point that actually it's not very helpful to be looking for signs necessary of God's hand in our lives. As if to think that if something coincidental happens, then that's a sign from God telling us something, and if nothing happens, then He's not.

Because, if God is sovereign, then He's constantly working in our lives. We don't need to sort of be looking for this, that, or the other. We ought to be trusting that God is working throughout, in all things.

I mean, Jesus even said that the number of hairs on your head are numbered by God, are given to you by God. Which in my case is not too many to count. Yeah, but, I mean, that's just less work for God.

[8 : 23] But, that means, if that's true for my hair, that's true for everything in life, isn't it? That's all evidence of God's hand at work. And I suppose for us, the only thing that's troubling us is that we don't quite know ahead of time, do we, often, what God may be doing specifically.

And we do want to know, because, we want to, for example, not make the wrong decision. But as I said last week, that's not how the life of faith works, is it?

Even here, as we look at Ruth, even though we can see sort of things happening up to now, there's really nothing to suggest, or definitively say, what's going to happen next, is it?

Yes, her choice of Boaz's view may be the right one, but it could just be a one-off thing, or one-day thing, after which, well, tomorrow, she might have to go look for food or provision somewhere else.

And then the whole question, which we've been sort of keeping our eye on, in terms of continuing a Luminax line, is still up in the air, isn't it? I want to come back to this point right at the end again, but for now, let's move on with the story where Ruth is overwhelmed by Boaz's kindness.

[9 : 38] This is uncommon kindness, prompting her to bow down low to the ground. And in verse 10, she asks, Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me, a foreigner?

To which Boaz replies, I've been taught 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 come to live with the people you did not know before.

Now, you can tell by the way Boaz has acted that he's a generous man, regardless. His workers love him so much so that they bless him when he arrives.

And so, I take it that this is not the first time that Boaz is being generous. And I take it probably that he would have been generous to Ruth anyway. And yet, when asked by Ruth, Boaz responds by saying or attributing his generosity to Ruth's own faithfulness.

Can you see? Her kindness to Naomi is one reason for his generosity. Now, it seems Ruth has been the talk of the town. The women have been sort of gossiping, maybe, about her since they met Naomi in chapter 1.

[10 : 51] This is good gossiping, by the way. So much so that even Boaz knew about the story of Ruth. And so, he now uses her faith as a prompt for his generosity.

In fact, if you look at Boaz's prayer, this is what he says. May the Lord repay you for what you've done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Now, Ruth responds, not by sort of taking credit, but in verse 13, saying, no, 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.

And so, I hope you're beginning to see how God's provision works hand in hand with Ruth's faithfulness. They're not mutually sort of exclusive, are they?

On the one hand, God's providence, we have to recognize, is still holy due to his grace. Ruth recognizes that she's undeserving of Boaz's kindness.

[11 : 58] God's grace is still God's grace. It's not earned. And yet, on the other hand, through Boaz's words, we see that God is rewarding Ruth for her faithfulness.

He's responding to her willingness to leave her gods, to take refuge under his wings. And what's more, Ruth has been hard at work, hasn't she?

She's been responding to this generosity of being allowed to glean by working hard and only resting in the shelter for a short time. So this is more evidence of her faith and loyalty to Naomi.

So I want to say that Ruth's faith is relevant to God. His grace is still freely given, but that doesn't mean Ruth then sits back and does nothing. You know, you have to realize that Ruth would not be receiving this grace in the first place had she not chosen to follow Naomi back to Judah, right?

Nor to go out in the fields to work. Although these things she had to, in one step, step out in faith in order to take hold of the gift that God has given to her, the generosity.

[13 : 08] So, the principle here is that trusting in God doesn't mean you don't have to obey Him. That you just sit back and do nothing. Let go and let God.

It's not sort of, I don't think it's right. Faith ought to result in good works, as James says in the New Testament. Well, let's move on and the rest of the chapter shows us more of Boaz's generosity.

I won't go into detail because it's been read to us, but here we see Boaz as God's provider, both to Naomi and Ruth.

And this not merely as a one-off, but as an ongoing matter. So, in verse 14, Boaz invites Ruth to eat with him, indeed a sign of generosity.

But such is his generosity, Ruth has enough for takeaway, even, to bring home a doggy bag of roasted grain. And then on returning to the field, Boaz instructs his workers to deliberately drop some of his harvests, you know, their harvests, so that Ruth can come and pick them up.

[14 : 13] So that what she gets is not just the leftovers, but some of the pick of the crop as well. So much so that when Naomi finds out all of this at the end of the day, she sees immediately God's hand in it.

And so we read in verse 20, she says, The Lord bless him, Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. He has not stopped showing kindness to the living and the dead, she added. That man is our close relative.

He is our guardian redeemer. Now we'll deal with the concept of guardian redeemer in the next two chapters, but can you see how Naomi is beginning to join the dots, isn't she, of how God is going to provide for them?

that it might be Boaz. And so much so that she jumps at the offer Boaz makes to Ruth, inviting her to keep working on the field or at the field.

And so she says in verse 22, It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else's field, you might be harmed. And so Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvest finished, and she lived with her mother-in-law.

[15 : 18] Well, that's the story that we're going to wrap up with so far for tonight. But I want to just come back again to just reflect on the relevance of this story for us, because it's more than just a feel-good story for us, surely.

So, firstly, we've spoken of God's sovereignty, which we've seen, but then also of God's provision and providence in all of life, because he's sovereign, and not merely in the God moments, so-called, in our lives.

We also saw Ruth's faith and faithfulness, which goes hand-in-hand with God's sovereignty. Ruth responds to God's grace, but God also rewards as she does, responds in faith, and so provides for her and Naomi in accordance with her faithfulness.

But third, we see Boaz as God's provider. He's the one that God uses, to bless Naomi and Ruth. And that same principle is true for us as well, that God's provider, God gives us providers as his means of blessing.

But the key for us is to understand that it's through Christ. For us as Christians, it's through Christ that God's provision to us occurs. In other words, Christ is to us what Boaz is to Ruth and Naomi.

[16 : 47] And if you have that frame through this entire book, then you'll get a sense of what God is trying to teach us. So all God's blessings come to us through his son. We take refuge under God's wings in Christ.

And God's rich inheritance for his son is also what Christ intends to share with us. Everything that we have, we have through Christ and because of him.

So we have that New Testament promise in Romans chapter 8, which brings all of it together for us as Christians, I think, where Paul writes, we know that in all things God works for the good.

So remember all things, all things work for the good of those who love him, who respond by faith, who have been called according to his purpose, that done by grace. And in the next verse, Paul writes, for those God foreknew, he also predest them to be conformed to the image of his son, that he might be the first born among many brothers and sisters.

And so, we are not only being blessed in Christ, the reward, God's richest reward for us, is actually to make us like his son. To bless us is to make us to conform to his image, both in character, and then ultimately in glory as well.

[18 : 05] And that is the end to which all things work for good, in our lives. So, that's God's will for us, I wonder whether you realize.

You, me, and all who belong to Christ, God calls us and then shapes us and uses every moment and event in our lives with the aim of conforming us to the image of his son.

The greatest blessing we can have is to be like Jesus. Now, God has already provided for that in one sense when he sent his son to die for us, so that we can firstly have forgiveness of sin in Christ.

Then he gives us the spirit so that as we live by faith and obedience, we have that power by the spirit to do so, to be like Jesus. But notice friends, that in Romans 8, it says that all things work for the good.

It's not just good things work for the good. So-called good things and not the bad things in our lives. In other words, as I've been saying from the start, God is using all things, working through all things in our lives, and nothing is wasted.

[19 : 20] Every moment in our life is being used to that end. And as I said again, when we go through life, often it's not possible to know what God is really up to at that point in time, is it?

Why is this happening to me in such a way that I'm actually being made like you? It's hard to see. But it's often only afterwards, as we're looking back, that we see how really God has been at work.

Even through those things that we thought is really bad and we shouldn't have gone down, we can then begin to see, oh no, actually that's not a detour, that's not a random thing that God just put in our lives.

But no, God was using even that trial, or that adversity, or that mistake of me, by me, to help shape me. Because God is sovereign over all that we do.

And I have to say that my own testimony is indeed of that. And as the years go by, the great thing about being a Christian for many, many, many years, persisting and being faithful is the longer you are a Christian, the more you can look back and see the growing amount of evidence of just how God has been working in me.

[20 : 31] and then when you know that, there is a deeper and deeper sense of his care for you. You grow in faith, as it were, even through the ups and downs in life.

And then the effect of that is to calm you when you face the next trial. Because you know, as you look back, that God has done that. He has been there for us all the time, not least at the very start, before we even became Christians, by sending his son to die for us.

And if God would do all that up to now, then surely he would keep doing that. Why would he stop now? Well, we are just beginning to see, aren't we, in Ruth and Naomi, just how God is doing that.

Two chapters into it, and we will see in the next two chapters more of that as well. That is the theme of this book. God works for good in all things to those who love him, like Ruth.

like Naomi, who are called according to his purpose. And so my encouragement for us is to continue to keep walking in that path of faith, and to seek refuge under the wings of his son.

[21 : 45] Let's pray. Father, we thank you that in Christ, your purpose and will for us is to be like him, to enjoy all that he has as co-heirs with him.

Thank you that in light of this destiny, we live day by day under your sovereign and loving hand. Help us to trust fully in you, and to look back at all that you've done to bring us to this point with great thanksgiving, knowing that they're not random coincidences, but all of our life is filled with the signs of your rich provision and reward for us.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.