

Sermon 2nd August 2009 (Ruth 3) “Our plans and his providence”

The Lord be with you!

(See, you were listening last week.)

I am *so* tempted to give this sermon a subtitle.

We could call it: “How to get a man”
or simply “the Biblical way to go on a date”

What type of advice does Naomi give Ruth here?

Have a bath.

Put on your perfume,
some head-turning clothes,
go to the stag party down at the barn,
wait till it’s late and he’s had a drink or two,
then uncover him, lie down beside him.
And he’ll tell you what to do.

Oh, I bet he will.

OK, hands up who thinks Naomi gave Ruth wise advice?

Can I assure you that anyone with their hand in the air at this point will NOT be asked to lead a youth group in Stonelaw Church!
(And certainly not one my daughters go to.)

Sadly, though, the “Naomi courtship method” is not that different from the method used by many people in our society today.

People do go out – dressed to show they are sexually available,
they go to parties, they have some drink,
they get into physical situations with people they don’t really know,
and they hope it will have a happy ending.
And sometimes it does – but sometimes it doesn’t.

So, before we go on with this passage of Ruth, I want to outline a distinction that is very important when we are reading Biblical texts – the distinction between passages that are proscriptive and passages that are descriptive.

Proscriptive passage plainly tell us what to do.

“Thou shalt not steal” – it’s a commandment – it does what it says on the tin.

It’s proscriptive.

The story of the Good Samaritan proscribes behaviour as well;

“Go, and do likewise” says Jesus. That’s a command.

But other passages describe.

They tell us what happened, and invite us to learn from it,
but not necessarily to copy it.

“Judas went forth and hung himself”

“Abraham tied up his son and put him on the altar”

“Lot slept with his daughters”

No one is suggesting we should do any of these things.

So if you are single, and you looking for a godly spouse,
or if you are advising someone who is,
don’t feel you have to go to “Aunt Naomi’s advice column.”

So, that having been said, what can we learn from this passage?

Well, the overarching theme of the Book of Ruth is that providence of God.

God is the one who provides good things for his people.
He blesses them with the harvest.
He protects them, and shields them and keeps them.

He has a plan for the people he loves.

In the Book of Ruth, God has a plan to provide for Naomi.
He has a plan for the life of Ruth – this former pagan who has stepped out and committed her life to him, and the plan involves bringing two godly people together: Ruth and Boaz.

This plan will bless their lives – but it is also part of a far bigger plan for all God’s people.

For Ruth and Boaz will have a son called Obed,
and Obed will have a son called Jesse,
and Jesse will have a son called David, the King
and his descendent will be Jesus.

God has a plan for each of his people – to bless them, and to bless others through them.

It isn’t always easy to see God’s plan and providence.
It can’t have been easy for Ruth and Naomi when they were widowed in Moab.
It can’t have been easy for them when they starving in Bethlehem.
It can’t have been easy to believe that God wanted to bless them.

Yet God told Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29:11)

“ I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

But, even if I know that God has a plan for my life, it raises the questions:
what is my part?
what am I to do?
Am I just to sit back and wait for it to happen?

The Thessalonians Christians firmly believed in God’s plan.

God had a plan for the world – and it involved sending Jesus back on the last day to put all things in order.

They firmly believed in God’s plan and God’s future. They were full of hope.

And so what did they do?

They did nothing.

They sat back and waited for God to act.

And Paul had to write and say

“You are a bunch of lazy wasters – get off your backsides and get a job!”

God had a plan for Ruth and Naomi – to feed them and bless them.

But we saw last week that Ruth got up and got a job – she gleaned in the field.

She worked because she trusted that God had a plan and God would provide.

Now God has a plan to bring Ruth and Boaz together, and so Naomi decides to do something, although whether it is the right thing remains to be seen.

And if, in your life at the moment, God’s plan for you blessing seems about as clear as mud, and there seems like huge obstacles in the way, what are you to do?

What is our part in his providence?

Where does our initiative come in?

Well, let’s recap what the book of Ruth has already taught us.

(And you can get these sermons from the website if you missed them)

We began with a famine in Bethlehem
Bethlehem means the House of Bread – but God had withheld the Bread.

And so a man called Elimelech comes up with a plan.

And it was a terrible plan.

His plan was to take his believing Christian family out of the Promised Land – into the pagan land of Moab.

A land where there was no Church and no godly fellowship.

The Moabites are also a sexually immoral people – Bible says they are products of the incest of Lot and his daughters – this is not a good place for his young family to grow up.

As an economic plan it made sense – there are job opening in Moab, but he utterly ignores the spiritual consequences for his family.

If a patent is a bread winner, then he or she needs to remember that the family does not live by bread alone.

And we said the irony was that Elimelech's name means "My God is King", yet he made his plans with no reference to God, or to God's providence.

The move to Moab was a disaster, and in Moab everyone dies.

And so, his widow, Naomi, returns home to Bethlehem

And she is bitter.

And she thinks God is against her

And she says "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty" (1:21)

Her husband had a dreadful ungodly plan, but when it doesn't work, it is all God's fault – God's lack of planning – a failure of God's providence.

"I have emptiness inside.

I have no hope.

I don't believe that God is going to bless me.

I don't believe that there is a good plan."

Have you felt like that? It is all hopeless and it is all God's fault?

But with Naomi comes Ruth.

Ruth is a Moabitess, a former pagan, perhaps with a troubled past, and she takes this remarkable decision to step out and to trust God – and to commit her life to God's people.

She says to Naomi, your God will be my God, and your people my people. (1:16)

And at the beginning of chapter 2, she stepped out again.

They had no food – they were empty,

but Ruth figures, "if God has brought me to Bethlehem, then he has a plan and he will protect me".

And so, she comes up with her own plan:

"I will go to the fields and glean. I will work and beg."

It is a risky plan because she could get raped or robbed, but she puts the plan into action, because she trusts that God will send someone who will show her favour.

Notice, she is able to plan and then to step out and take a risk

because she believes that God has a plan for her, and he will see her through.

The human plan and God's plan come together in Ruth:
that's faith in action.

Paul calls it “working out your salvation”

Not working for your salvation – because salvation comes from the Lord – you can’t save yourself. But not sitting back either – rather ready to act, to cooperate with God.

But what was Naomi doing meantime?

Ruth is planning – Ruth is out looking for food in the field.

What is Naomi doing?

The answer is *nothing*.

Naomi has no plan, because Naomi has no hope.

“We are starving, but there’s no point in doing anything.”

“It’s God’s fault – he hates me – let him sort it, or I’ll just die here”

And how often are we like that?

We refuse to do anything positive, because we have no hope that the future will improve, and no trust that God can turn things about.

Someone else is trying to make plans and be positive and turn the situation round, and we just want to tell them how it won’t work, there’s no point, it’s all rubbish.

“I don’t have a job, there’s no point in looking for one, there aren’t any”

“No one is interested in the Church, there’s no point in doing any mission, and they’ll not come anyway” Why bother with a development worker? Why bother with the Meeting Place? It won’t work. It won’t make any difference.”

“The poor are starving, there’s no point in doing anything, it want make any difference”

So often we pour cold water on other people’s plans,

not because we have a better plan

but because we have stopped hoping

and we have stopped believing that God really does have the power to turn things around.

The more we look and see what God can do, the more we are encouraged to see what we can do.

And in Chapter two, God started to act.

Ruth went into the field “and it happened” says the Bible - a big coincidence.

She just happened to decide to go to the field.

She just happened to randomly choose a field.

And it just happened that it was owned by a rich man,

who just happened to be a godly man,

and who just happened to be a single man,

and who just happened to visit his field that day.

In her faith, Ruth stepped out with her plan

and his faithfulness God stepped in with his.

And in Chapter two, that act of God begins to change Naomi.

The old cynic who had no hope, and believed God had hated her, begins to see God’s blessing and to praise him again.

And this is the remarkable thing about Chapter three:

Naomi takes the initiative.

Naomi has a plan.

Naomi has begun to see the possibilities for the future and she’s ready to go with it.

It may be a foolish plan.
It may be a dodgy plan.
It may be a morally ambiguous plan;
but it is a plan,
and it is a plan made in response to her seeing the return of God's blessing through Boaz.

And now, Naomi is trying to solve a problem.
Ruth likes Boaz – she's been talking about him incessantly
Boaz likes Ruth – he went way out of his way to look after her in the field, to put her at her ease, to bless her and pray for her.

But Boaz hasn't called Ruth.

(What do you expect – he may be godly, prayerful, protective, sensitive and thoughtful – but he's still a guy, and he still misses the signs.
You know guys, those subtle woman signs you are supposed to get, but even after 15 years of marriage, you don't have a clue?)

And so, the mother-in-law decides to give things a shove.

Why is Boaz not calling?

Well, here we are speculating, but let me.

He's free to marry her. He's obviously keen to marry her.

But it seems he doesn't think Ruth would be interested.

He says "I expected you'd go after some young man" (3:10)

"I'm pushing forty – the hair's receding.

I thought you were out of my league.

It never occurred to me. I didn't read the signs."

So what is Naomi's advice?

"Get in his face, girl. Show him you are interested.

Don't dress like a worker who wants a job in his field, dress like a woman.

He's a man. He's slow. Make it obvious."

But what she asks Ruth to do is right on the borderline.

Nothing improper happens, but the words that Scripture uses tell us that Ruth is taking a big risk.

Shadowy activity at night, a woman where only prostitutes go, and commands to "uncover" to "lie down beside" – these words are sexually charged.

Ruth is taking a risk.

Boaz might not be the upright man she thinks.

Or Boaz might be offended and think her a slut.

A woman, throwing herself at a man's feet, quite literally.

The feminists hate this text – it seems too sexist.

And yet, there is something remarkable here,

because Ruth is no shrinking violet.

She's the girl who believes in stepping out, taking action, taking risks, and trusting God.

And there's one bit of Naomi's advice she ignores.

Naomi says her that *Boaz* will tell her what to do, but in fact, Ruth just comes out with it, and *she* tells Boaz what *she* wants him to do.

"Spread your cloak over your servant" v8.

That's the same language used elsewhere for what a husband does when he takes a wife. It's what God does for Israel as he takes her to be his own.
Ruth isn't after a one-night-stand,
she is proposing to *him*.

So what do we learn here?

Well, this may be bad dating advice, but actually, it tells us that in the end character is more important than rules.

Boaz is a godly man. He's the guy who's grown up in the faith. He's never left it. He's never skipped Sunday School. He prays for his workers. He takes God's ethics into his workplace. He's always been full of the Lord.

Ruth is a convert. She's a former pagan – perhaps she's got a past. The Moabites were a sexually immoral people. But God turned her life around. She's come so far – and she's just started.

And God in his providence is bringing these two godly people together.

Notice here, that what keeps them safe in the morally ambiguous situation is not a set of rules, nor is it a chaperone, but it is their character.

They are people who bring God into their lives, into their work, into their plans, and so God will be there in their relationship, and in their romantic explanations.

Parents take note – you can't protect your children – but you can influence them to be godly prayerful people.

And when Ruth proposes, Boaz says:

“May you be blessed by the Lord,
as this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first – for you have not gone after the young men”

What are these acts of loyalty?

Well, Ruth has made two huge decisions.

The first was to step out of Moab, and the second was to ask Boaz to marry her.

Both of those decisions were not the obvious ones.

It was more obvious to stay in Moab, where her people were.

It was more obvious to look for a younger husband, perhaps one who was more with the fun and less with the God bit and the prayer bit.

But in both those decisions Ruth acted in loyalty.

Loyalty to Naomi – how can she help her? How can she provide for her?

How can she make her happy?

But also in both those decisions she's been faithful to God.

She came to believe in the God of Naomi.

She left Moab because of that.

And she sought after a godly husband because of that.

And her choices are made in prayer and faith and seeking God's providence and blessing.

Now perhaps there are not many people here who are at the place of choosing a partner, or of contemplating immigration, but whatever the decisions we have to make, the same principles apply.

Are we going to be like Elimelech who made a practical decision without regard to godliness:

who used his brain, but not his prayers, and made his plans with no thought of God's?

Or are we going to be like Naomi in chapter one,
and refuse to make any plans at all, because we have no hope in God's plans
whatsoever?

Or are we willing to be like Ruth and Naomi in chapter three:
opening ourselves to God's plan for our blessing;
hopeful in what he can do, and he will do;
recognising what he's started to do already;
and looking to make our plans co-operating with his providence.

Of course, we are human, and sometime our plans are not so wise.
Sometimes they are quite dangerous, and sometimes they fail.

But, if they are made because we want God's blessing
because we want to cooperate with what he has already begun,
then he will honour that.

And he will pour blessing on our lives.

May the Lord be with you in all the choices you make.

Amen