

**When Everything Changes:
Finding God in Life's Transitions**
Looking Out for You
May 15/16, 2010

As Shannon said, we're continuing in our series "When Everything Changes: Finding God in Life's Transitions." And we're using the Old Testament story of Naomi and Ruth as an illustration and as a model because, as we learned last week, their lives were marked by a radical, unexpected and undesired change that left them homeless and destitute.

Let's do a quick recap of how that happened. Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, had moved to the land of Moab from Israel, when a famine struck Israel. Eventually, their two sons married two Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Then Elimelech died ... then the two sons died ... leaving three women widowed.

Naomi decided that the best thing to do was to head back home to Israel in hopes of finding a relative who would care for her. She encouraged her two daughters-in-law to do the same: to go back to the house of their father. Orpah did. But Ruth would not go.

Instead, she said:

"Where you go I will go and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried." Ruth 1:16-17 (ESV)

And as chapter one of the Book of Ruth comes to an end, the two of them are entering Bethlehem just as the barley harvest is beginning ... which is where the scripture we just heard picks up.

But they're also entering "stage two" of transition according to Dr. William Bridges, who is probably the foremost expert on the subject of change. Bridges says, as we learned last week, that there are three stages of transition that we all go through, or need to go through, *internally* when change happens *externally*, whether that change is something we *choose and we welcome* (like a new career or getting married or going off to college or having a child) or something that's *forced* on us, or something we don't desire, (as in the case of Naomi and Ruth ... as in the case of anyone who has been downsized or divorced or widowed or become empty nesters or forced to relocate or ... fill-in-the-blank).

Bridges says,

The first stage is "The Ending" ...

... a time of loss, a time of grief and anger as reality says you have got to let go of that world as it was and even part of our identity as it was in that.

Stage two is "The Neutral Zone" ...

... a time, Bridges says, that's typically characterized by feelings of confusion and disorientation because we're releasing our attachment to the old world and the identity and purpose that goes with it, but it's still not clear what we will be and do in the new world that's been brought about by the change.

Finally, stage three is the “The New Beginning” ...

... where we develop a new identity and purpose and we’re motivated by a vision of who and what we could be and do in the new world.

Now, as we saw last week, Chapter One of Ruth is an example of stage one – the ending. (And if you weren’t here last week and you are in stage one of a transition, I highly recommend you get a DVD or listen to the MP3 on our website. It will help you).

Chapter Two of Ruth – the story we heard just a few minutes ago – and also chapter three, which we’ll mention briefly in just a bit is an example of stage two.

Ruth and Naomi, at this point in their lives, are in The Neutral Zone.

For both women, radical change has taken place in their family structure, in their physical location and in their day-to-day existence and it’s not clear to them where they are going and what life is going to be. It’s an unknown to both of them.

But for Ruth, the disorientation is even more dramatic. Unlike Naomi, she has no family in Israel. Unlike Naomi, she has no history in the community – she’s never even *been* to Bethlehem. Furthermore, even though she is a believer in Yahweh God of Israel, *racially* she’s “one of them” – a descendant of Moab, a guy who was the father of, quite frankly, a depraved and detestable people.

Ruth is a woman truly caught between “what was” – life as a married woman in a completely different culture – and “what will be” – life as it will unfold in some way yet unknown to her.

I wonder this morning: can any of us here today relate to her situation? Maybe you can because know someone who is in the Neutral Zone right now. Maybe it’s *you* in the Neutral Zone. Maybe you’ve lost a job or a home or a spouse. Maybe you’ve retired. Maybe you’re new in this community. Whatever it is, in some way, you’re now separated from what you once were and what you once knew. And you’ve reached the point where you are beginning to mentally and emotionally let go of that former life and trying to figure out what the new normal will be, but you’re not there yet. Like Naomi and Ruth, you’re in the Neutral Zone.

That’s where you are but the question – as it was in the first stage, “The End” – is “where is God and what is He doing?” Where is God? And what is He doing when His People are caught in the Neutral Zone?

God, Ruth & The Neutral Zone

Well, let’s look a little deeper at what happens in Chapter Two after Ruth and Naomi reach Bethlehem and see if we can find out. We’ve already heard the basic story line:

- Ruth decides to go out to the fields to pick up leftover grain.

- She winds up in a field owned by Boaz.
- For whatever reason, Boaz takes an interest in her and sees that she's cared for and protected.
- Ruth goes home that evening full after sharing a meal with Boaz, with over half a bushel of grain to give to her mother-in-law.

Now, if you were here last week, you probably remember that the end of this whole story is that Ruth and Boaz marry and have a son. So, you might be tempted to think that what's going on here in Chapter Two is a typical love story, where the unmarried Boaz takes Ruth under his wing because he thinks she's pretty or whatever. But the truth is, Ruth probably *isn't* very pretty at this moment, when Boaz first sees her. She's near the point of starvation; she's covered in dirt and sweat from working in the fields. She's a mess. In addition, Boaz seems to be too old for Ruth. He calls her a "daughter." He calls her a "girl."

In spite of how it might sound, this isn't your classic romance unfolding. In fact, in Chapter Three of Ruth, when the romantic action finally takes place, it's very brief. And when it happens, it's because Ruth makes the first move, not Boaz. This story, whatever it is, is not "boy meets girl, boy is nice to girl in an effort to win girl." That is not what this is.

So, what is it? What's really going on here?

Well, let's go even deeper. Let's read the first part of it closely, beginning in the last verse of chapter one.

And remember, after the dramatic change forced upon them by the death of their husbands ...

Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. Ruth 1:22 (NIV)

Keep that in mind.

Chapter 2 verse 2 tells us that shortly thereafter ...

Ruth said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter."

So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters.

Now, "to glean" (not a phrase we use anymore) means to go behind the harvesters and pick up whatever grain falls in the fields as they are doing the harvesting. In fact, in the nation of Israel, God had told farmers to purposely be a little sloppy in the harvest process so that the poor of the community could walk through the fields, pick up whatever was missed, and have food.¹ And that's what Ruth was doing.

Verse 3 says that ...

As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.

Now that phrase "as it turned out" is very interesting in the Hebrew. The literal translation is "her chance chanced upon"² and the meaning is that ...

“Ruth’s chance chanced upon the portion of a field belonging to Boaz.”

Some would say that “Ruth’s luck lucked out” in that she just so happened to choose the field belonging to Boaz. And given that he eventually becomes her husband, you can see why people would say that, but that’s probably not what the writer has in mind at this point in the story.

What’s in mind is much more immediate – the last phrase in that sentence says that Boaz was from the clan of Elimilech. Remember him? Elimilech was Naomi’s husband. We’ll come back to why that’s important shortly, but let’s move to verse four where the good fortune continues for Ruth:

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, “The LORD be with you!”

“The LORD bless you!” they called back. Ruth 2:4 (NIV)

Amazing isn’t it - at the precise moment when Ruth is in the field ... Boaz shows up!

And from the way he speaks to his workers, obviously, Boaz is a good and godly man, which is important to note because, at that time in the history of Israel there was no king and, as the Book of Judges puts it, “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” And whenever that happens – whenever fallen people take it upon themselves to decide to define right and wrong instead of listening to what God says is right and wrong, because we are predisposed to evil, because we are fallen - great immorality follows.

And that’s how it was in that day and time. In fact, you can see evidence of that a little later in the story when Boaz and Naomi *both - independent of each other* - tell Ruth to not go to any other field because in another field she probably wouldn’t be safe. She would risk being assaulted – sexually molested and worse.

OK, so, are you getting the picture here? When Ruth finds herself in the Neutral Zone ...

1. It *just so happens* to be barley harvest.
2. And she *just so happens* to be in a place where those who are poor are on the receiving end of a God-ordained wealth redistribution system known as “gleaning.”
3. As she wanders through the fields, looking for a place to glean, she *just so happens* to wind up in Boaz’s field.
4. She *just so happens* to be there at the exact same time Boaz arrives from the town.
5. Boaz *just so happens* to be a good and godly man who will not take advantage of her, like many of the other men in that community who would.
6. And, to top it all off, Boaz *just so happens* to be related to Naomi’s husband, a fact which makes him what the Jews called a “kinsman redeemer.”

Basically, what that meant in that culture was that a man’s male relatives – his kinsmen, specifically, his brothers, his cousins and his sons – were responsible for his wife and children should anything happen to him. And because Boaz was from the same clan as Elimilech, that meant Boaz was in line to take responsibility for Naomi and for Ruth which, when we read the rest of the story, is what actually leads to their marriage.

In fact, since we don't have time to read it, let me just condense it into three sentences.

- At the end of this day (the very first day in the field), Naomi discovers that Ruth “by chance” worked in Boaz’s field.
- Naomi tells Ruth that Boaz is a kinsman redeemer and tells her to go propose marriage to Boaz. (The way she does it is fascinating. Read chapter three!)
- Boaz, amazed that Ruth hasn’t, in his words, “run after the younger men,” says “yes.”

And it all happened because Ruth’s “chance chanced upon” all of these things: the right season, the right country, the right field, the right time, the right character, and the right bloodline ... which makes you wonder if there’s something more than “chance” at work here.

And there is.

God is at work in Ruth’s Neutral Zone, leading and guiding, protecting and providing.

God is at work. And, theologians have a word for this kind of divine activity that causes fortuitous things to “just so happen” to God’s people. The word is *Providence*. When good “just so happens” to God’s people (like Ruth) that’s the Providence of God at work. That’s God looking out for you.

Now a lot of people get confused about this. If something miraculous happens, we’ll say, “Oh, *that’s* God!” But if circumstances just so happen to work out, they’ll say “well, that’s just luck.” But there is no such thing as luck for God’s people. What happened to Ruth wasn’t luck. It was Providence.

In fact, through the prophet Isaiah, God at one point made it pretty clear that He really didn’t appreciate His people crediting “luck” for this kind of thing.

To those who did, God said:

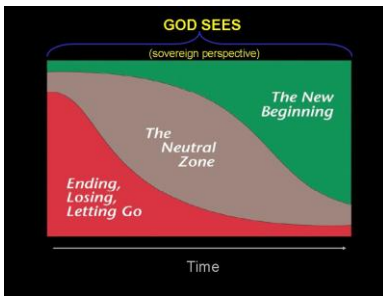
“You have prepared a table for the god of Good Fortune and offered cups full of spiced wine to the goddess of Destiny. Now I will ‘destine’ you for death. All of you will bow to be slaughtered. I called, but you didn’t answer. I spoke, but you didn’t listen.”
Isaiah 65:11-12 (GW)

In other words, “in all of the things you credit to luck or Good Fortune or destiny, in all of those things I was the one at work. I was speaking to you. I was calling you to myself, but you didn’t respond. So you’re choosing that end, so I’m going to let you go where those will take you.”

Strong words. But there is no such thing as luck for God’s people. It’s Providence. It’s *God* who is at work in Ruth’s Neutral Zone, leading and guiding, protecting and providing. He’s looking out for her.

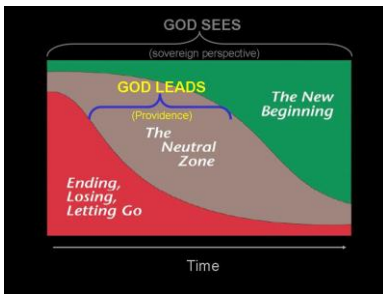
So, let’s go back to that little transition diagram and see how this part of the story fits.

As we learned last week, when we’re in Stage 1 of a transition – the ending ...



... we need to remember that even though we can't see the end from the beginning, God does see and God promises to bring his plan for His people to fruition. That's what we mean by *sovereignty*.

But in order for God's sovereignty to mean anything in the real world, God must lead and guide, protect and provide for his people.



That's what we mean by *Providence*. And that's part of what God does when we're stumbling around in that time between "what was" and what will be.

Providential Experience

So, for the rest of this message, I want to talk to you about Providence because, if you're someone who follows Christ and you're in the Neutral Zone or headed in that direction and you can see it coming, the Providence of God is something that's very important to you whether you know it or not. God is truly looking out for you. It's critical that you understand this, that you have confidence in this, and that you know how you can actually experience and be aware of that providence.

And there are some great lessons in this part of Ruth's story that will help us in that.

I think one of the clearest lessons is that ...

1. We experience Providence when we expect it.

We experience God's Providence when we expect it. When we expect that, somewhere along the line, something good is going to happen to us because God is looking out for us, that's when we'll be able to see it.

Now, just to be clear, I'm not saying that Providence itself is *dependent* on our expectation. Providence isn't another

word for Rhonda Byrnes concept of “The Secret” – (some of you read that book or saw the DVD; we did a series on it here a couple of years ago) you know, where you control a Universe “that’s just waiting to be called upon to deliver whatever we desire”; where you just visualize something good (instead of something bad) and it will happen. My favorite part of that movie is when the lady goes to the mailbox and says:

“Are you tired of receiving bills in your mailbox? Expect a check!”³

Do you remember that part? It was kind of funny. That’s not what I’m talking about here. “Expecting Providence” isn’t some magic formula to activate the Universe on your behalf.

God’s Providence exists and works on our behalf *regardless of what we do or don’t do*. It’s part of God’s grace towards his People. But our *experience* of that Providence, our *recognition* of God’s invisible Hand at work in our lives is dependent on our expectation.

Remember what Ruth asked of Naomi?

“Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor.” Ruth 2:2 (NIV)

See, that day when Ruth got up, she had no idea where she was going, but she started walking and she had a confidence that somewhere along the way, someone would show her favor.

Why? *Because she knew that’s what God always does for his people.* We talked about that several months ago when we talked about the fact that we are blessed as God’s people. Because Christ was blessed and we are in Christ, we, too, are objects of God’s favor. We are blessed and not cursed. And Ruth, in spite of all she had been through in Moab had a strong sense of that. She had an expectation of going out today and finding favor somewhere.

And when she did, what does she say?

“Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me?” Ruth 2:10 (NIV)

Ruth expected Providence and when it “just so happened” she was able to recognize and experience it.

A second clear lesson from this part of the story is that ...

2. We experience Providence when we take action.

Now, think about this. Ruth and her mother-in-law are sitting around there hungry. But they’re not waiting for manna to drop from the sky. Instead, Ruth took action. She was hungry, so she went to the fields to glean. She started walking and God directed her steps to a provision far beyond anything she could ever imagine, far beyond anything she deserved.

And that’s how Providence works. God uses our free will choices, when we belong to Him, and then somehow directs them.

As the Book of Proverbs puts it:

A person may plan his/her own journey, but the LORD directs his steps. Proverbs 16:9 (GW)

A person gets up in the morning and says, “OK, I’m going to go this way because this is the best I’ve got in front of me. I’m hungry and I’ve got to get food. So, I’m going out to glean.” And, God directs the steps.

Now, again, this isn’t the same thing as “making your own luck.” No, this isn’t luck. This is a Divine/Human partnership where we do what we humans are supposed to do and God does what God is supposed to do.

Ruth simply did what common sense said needed to be done ... get out there and glean, and then God showed up in the middle of it.

Now, some people get that (and some don’t), but a lot of us will take that even further, maybe a little too far, and instead of it becoming a Divine/human partnership, we start assuming the major role. We start thinking it is all up to ourselves. We try to figure out all the angles – we try, even when we’re in the Neutral Zone to figure out what is in the future, “it’s so uncomfortable in this neutral zone, so I’m going to run out of this to wherever. I’m just getting out of this neutral zone.”

And Ruth speaks to that as well, in the third lesson, which is that ...

3. We experience Providence as we live with ambiguity.

And, as I said, a lot of us want to run from ambiguity. We want everything nailed down and certain, we want clarity. And it’s just not like that in the Neutral Zone ... which is what Ruth experienced.

In Chapter Three, when Ruth proposes to Boaz (which, since he was a kinsman redeemer, was her legal right to do so) Boaz is more than willing, but there’s a problem, he says:

“While it’s true that I am one of your family redeemers, there is another man who is more closely related to you than I am. Stay here tonight, and in the morning I will talk to him. If he is willing to redeem you, very well. Let him marry you. But if he is not willing, then as surely as the LORD lives, I will redeem you myself!” Ruth 3:12-13 (NLT)

Now, imagine what that would feel like if you were Ruth. Ruth has obviously developed some feelings for this man, but he’s saying “there might be another guy out there that has the right to marry you. I’ll find out and let you know.”

Wow.

What’s a woman to do?

*Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens."
Ruth 3:18 (NIV)*

“You’ve done all you can do ... you’ve expected favor, you’ve taken action and now you have to wait until it becomes clear what’s next. And what’s next might not be what you think ought to be next.”

That’s ambiguity. And it’s hard and a lot of people freak out when they have to live with it. But if you run away from it, you might also be missing out on the experience of God’s Providence.

Now, in Ruth’s case, as you can guess, since they do get married (we already know the end of the story), the nearer kinsman declines his right to marry Ruth, to do what the kinsman redeemer is supposed to do. Bottom line, he just doesn’t want to get married to Ruth.

But Boaz does. And that’s what happens ... which leads to the fourth observation or lesson out of this story:

4. We (typically) experience Providence through people.

God’s Providence typically comes to us through people. Not always. Sometimes Providence happens in nature (weather sometimes does strange things when you’re in the middle of doing something) or timing of events, things that, really there is no way of controlling them, they just happen at the right time. Providence happens in that way. But almost always God looks out for us through other people.

In my own experience, I’ve moved three times in my life. I grew up in the DC area and spent the first 21 years of my life there. Moved to Texas and lived there for five years. Moved from Texas to New Jersey and lived there for five years and then moved here (in the late eighties). And every time I moved, it was that neutral zone – I had to let go of who I was and what people thought I was and go into a strange place where it wasn’t clear. I lived in the neutral zone three times. And every time, God’s Providence showed up to me through people. Specifically people in the church, and this was even before I was a pastor. But, just going and finding a congregation, finding people who love God, who know God, who understand that God works this way and then being part of that fellowship. I think maybe sometimes we sell that short, of how God’s Providence works through us. It comes to us through people.

That’s what happened to Ruth.

Following the advice of both Naomi and Boaz ...

*Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished.
And she lived with her mother-in-law. Ruth 2:23 (NIV)*

God looked out for her through that little community of servant girls and her mother-in-law.

But more significantly, obviously, God’s Providence for Ruth came through the person of Boaz, who went so far as to pay the price for redeeming her (it cost money to redeem a family). So, he paid the price and he married her. It was ordinary everyday stuff. Relational stuff, but, God was working through Boaz’s actions in Ruth’s life, bringing her closer to Himself and to His purposes and plans. That was the Providence coming through another person.

But as great as Boaz was, there is one who was even greater than Boaz: Jesus. God's providence usually comes through people, but God's greatest providence of all came through a person, Jesus of Nazareth who is the redeemer for all of us.

Peter writes:

God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. [amazing, that could have been said about Boaz and Ruth. That Ruth came from this terrible background. She had nothing redemptive in her, but Boaz paid the price. Jesus did the same thing, Peter said] And the ransom he paid was not mere gold or silver [like the ransom that Boaz paid]. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God.

1 Peter 1:18-19 (NLT)

See, Jesus is God's Providence for all of us. Being "in Jesus" means being in God's people. And, when we come to him and put our faith in him, like we symbolized this morning, that puts us in the family of God and when we're in the family of God, the people of God, that's when we're able to receive God's Providence in all things.

Providence almost always comes through people, through Jesus first and foremost ... which leads to the final lesson from Ruth that I want to share with you:

5. We experience Providence as we become instruments of Providence.

We experience Providence as we ourselves become instruments of Providence. See, this is more than just "us" and God meeting our needs, though He does that graciously. God has a bigger plan for this world; a bigger plan for you and for me than our own personal comfort and safety and happiness. And, we see this in Ruth several times. After Ruth proposes, the Bible says...

When Ruth went back to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "What happened, my daughter?"

Ruth told Naomi everything Boaz had done for her, and she added, "He gave me these six scoops of barley and said, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed. You be God's Providence for Naomi.'"

Ruth 3:16-17 (NLT)

And, ultimately, the purpose of Providence in Ruth's life – all of this "just so happened" stuff was so that Ruth could become the mother of Obed who was the father of Jesse who was the father of David ... who was King David ... from whose line both Mary and Joseph would descend, and through whom Christ was born.

So, she became Providence not just for her mother-in-law but for all of us through Christ. She became an instrument of God's Providence ... just like Boaz was an instrument of God's Providence. Just like you and I can be instruments of God's Providence.

And, that's a question I'll throw out to you – Could you be a Boaz to someone? I'm not talking about marrying someone, I'm talking about could you be a person through whom God's Providence comes? Could you be a Ruth? A person through whom God's Providence comes to other people. "Well, how would I do that?" Very specifically, we've heard about it already today in our service. When Shannon put the slide up on the board and said we need 19 people because we have a bunch of kids back there who need a human being to be the Providence of God in their lives. You could be God's Providence by signing up for eleven weeks this summer. You could *experience* God's Providence by *being* the

person who brings the Providence.

I sent you all a letter a couple of weeks ago about our financial situation as a church. I'm not going to go into all the details on that, but, *that* is a way. We love our church and we want God to provide for our church – well, guess what, God said, “hey, I gave you a job so you go make money and you take part of that money and you become the Providence. I'm being providential to you, you be my providence to someone else.”

So, we experience Providence when we expect it; we experience Providence when we take action; we experience it as we are able to live with a little bit of ambiguity in our life; Providence typically comes through people; and we ourselves can be an instrument of Providence in someone else's life.

Conclusion

As we close, I want to bring this back to the Neutral Zone idea because, as I said earlier, I'm pretty sure that more than a few of us here today are in the Neutral Zone or about to enter it.

Here is what I want to do – if you're in the neutral zone, or are heading that way (you can see it), I want to invite you to believe the good news that God's Providence is already there and He is looking out for you. I want to invite you to believe that no matter how disoriented and confused you may feel, God is not. God is not disoriented or confused. While you are in the neutral zone, God is going to direct your steps as you stumble around in the dark saying I've just got to do what comes next. God is going to direct your steps in accordance with his ultimate purpose for your life.

And I want to invite you, as Jesus did, to repent of the unbelief that there is no such thing as God's Providence, it's all just “luck” and mine just happens to be bad all the time. I want to invite you to repent of that belief. I want to invite you to repent of the thought that says, “well, there might be God's Providence, but it's not for me. God is not for me. God is against me. I'm cursed.” I want to invite you, invite all of us, to confess the times where we have bowed down to the idols of Good Fortune and Destiny – crediting them when God was the one who deserved the credit. I want to invite you to forsake the misguided belief that, if you're in the neutral zone, what you really need in this time is certainty and stability, when what you need is to just cease from all the worrying; to just trust God and experience God and allow God to lead you and direct your steps into new places and new ways that you may have never even dreamed of.

Finally, I want to invite you as you repent – as we all do – to rejoice in the grace that is ours in Christ. See, this is not about feeling *bad*, because we are really bad messed up people. No, this is about the grace of Christ, the ultimate redeemer, the ultimate provision, the ultimate Providence of God, who loves us so much that He forgives us beyond measure. I want us to rejoice in that.

To help us in that, the band is going to do a song that illustrates maybe how we feel when we're in the neutral zone and also illustrates the Providence of God. And as they sing, let God speak to you about these things.

And then, later in the song, we'll all stand and join in with them as a prayer of affirmation that even though we may not fully understand or even believe in God's Providence, that's what we want. We want to be people of faith even in the Neutral Zone. So, here we go ...

ENDNOTES

¹ Leviticus 19:9-1

² Ruth 2:3 NASB translation

³ Actual quote from The Secret