

FGBC: God in the Dark: Protected by Grace for Work

Ruth 2

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This last week, as I was researching for this message I came across a blog post written by a Doctor of Psychology talking about coincidence. Of course he is convinced that there are no explanations or meanings behind any of the coincidences we experience and argued that it is only the randomness of the universe shining through.

After the article a man self identified as CG left a post thanking the author for his blog and reflecting on a recent string of coincidences he experienced.

He wrote:

“My niece was recently killed in a tragic car accident and I started to reflect on some of the observations I made that spoke to me personally... My niece was killed by a DUI driver born in the same state of the foreign country I was born in. The driver was driving the same make of car I drive, and the accident happened in front of... one of the stores I work at [on] my birthday.... The most memorable thing for me is that a few hours before the accident my 10 yr old son started crying for no reason and when I asked him why he said “I don’t want to die.”... I have been an agnostic [most of my life] and sometimes an atheist, but this has given me a nudge towards believing in something more than coincidence. I feel like I should take some kind of lesson from this tragedy... I should make some changes in my life to love more, love deeper [that kind of thing].... The only thing I’m committed to is I prefer to remain non-religious and not tie this event to a ‘greater power’.”¹

Isn’t it ironic that some people work so hard to avoid hearing the voice of God while others hunger for it?

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Alright, grab your Bible and open to the book of Ruth. Today we are in chapter 2. Ruth is the 8th book in the Bible so pretty close to the beginning if you are looking for it.

Last week we encountered Naomi and her family at a devastating point in their lives. Things started going bad for them when a famine rolled through Israel and they were forced to look for food in the neighbouring pagan country of Moab.

While they were there Naomi’s husband died, and then her two sons died leaving her and her daughters-in-law, Orpa and Ruth, alone and vulnerable. Eventually Naomi heard that the famine had subsided and so decided to return to Judah. Orpa stayed in Moab but Ruth refused to leave Naomi and her God and so returned with her.

That’s how the story starts, and then we walk through life with these two women of faith who respond to tragedy very differently.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/connecting-coincidence/201607/there-are-no-coincidences>
(Accessed May 9, 2019)

While Naomi believed in God, she allowed the difficulty she encountered to harden her heart. She knew God was in control but her testimony was that “The LORD’s hand has turned against me... [and made] my life very bitter.”² Her focus on the tragedy left her unable to see any hope in the midst of the dark or believe that God was actually working things out, not just for the growth of His kingdom, but also for her blessing.

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Ruth is different. This young woman had experienced all the difficulty Naomi had, and had even less to hold onto. As a Moabite woman she was new to faith in YHWH, and yet she chose, in spite of the difficult path she had been given to walk, to believe God was not just in control but good.

And God was at work in the dark. His fingerprints were all over the place for those with eyes to see. And so as Naomi and Ruth get back to famine ridden Judah they find themselves arriving just in time for the barley harvest.

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And that brings us up to chapter 2. Let me read it for you, and as I do I encourage you to keep your eyes open. We don’t live in a world of random coincidence, God is at work in the dark.

[Read Ruth 2]

Did you see any fingerprints? The author of Ruth wants us to see them everywhere. God is at work stretching out His wings of provision to take care of those who run to Him for shelter.³

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So right off the bat Naomi turns out to be wrong. Her and Ruth were not totally alone. There was another relative who could take them in – Boaz. And He was from Naomi’s husband’s clan – the author tells us twice! And in verse 3 as Ruth goes out to glean behind the harvesters it just so happens that she ends up in Boaz’ field. What a coincidence! Now Ruth doesn’t know who Boaz is. It isn’t until she gets home that Naomi puts the pieces together. And how many fields are there in Judah? Lots. So “as it turned out”?! I don’t think so.

And the “coincidences” keep going. In verse 4, “Just then Boaz arrived.”

Friends, God is at work in the dark. This is His universe, this is His world, and we are His people. And He hasn’t just wound up the clock and let it run, YHWH has always been the God who steps down into creation and gets His hands dirty in our lives because He loves us.

² Ruth 1:13;20

³ Outline adapted from John Piper <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/ruth-under-the-wings-of-god> (Accessed May 9, 2019)

It's hard to believe, but the God of the universe actually cares about you. And so, even though it is dark and you don't know what's going on He is working out all things "for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose."⁴

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So what do we do with this? How are we supposed to live in light of this reality? Let me highlight a couple godly responses we can glean from Ruth.

First, it is important to stress that we don't choose to live a godly life in order to understand what God is doing in our lives. We choose to live a godly life because it is right to worship the good God even when He doesn't tell us what He's up to.

So last week we said it could be 120 years before what God is bringing into our lives now makes any sense. Ruth was just a story of God taking care of some random woman until King David came to power. It was only then that people realized how powerfully God had been at work in the dark.

So if you are experiencing difficulty right now and can't see how God could be in the midst of it don't throw in the towel just because you've endured it for a year or 5 years or 20 years – this is an incredibly short time to be faithful! Our job is not to figure out what God is doing, our job is to trust that He is at work even when it's dark.

Actually, even more than that, we need to trust God in a godly way – a Ruth way. Don't let your heart grow Mara bitter like Naomi. Instead side with Ruth and chose to worship in the midst of the dark. That's the first lesson of Ruth.

Second, when you aren't sure what God is up to, get to work. In this text we watch Ruth put on her gloves and initiate the care of her mother-in-law. So in verse 2 Naomi doesn't tell Ruth to get to work, instead Ruth says "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain." The point is don't wait for God to give you what you think you are entitled to. You aren't entitled to anything.

So when you are looking for where God is at work don't sit back and be passive, do something. And Ruth doesn't just work, she works! In verse 7 a couple servants describe Ruth's work ethic to Boaz and saying "She's been here since first thing in the morning, and only took one short break." And then verse 17 describes her beating out the grain she collected and taking home an ephah which was about 30 pounds.

Now the author doesn't want you to say "My John Deer can do more than that!" He wants us to be impressed with this woman. She's worked hard all day.

And not only is she a hard worker, but she's humble and not demanding. So in verse 7 the servants told Boaz how she approached them and asked for the opportunity to glean behind them.

⁴ Romans 8:28

Now last week we talked about how there was no social welfare system in Israel, but there were a few practices set up by which the poor could provide for themselves. And gleaning was one of them. It was socially expected that landowners would allow widows and other impoverished people to come and pick up anything that was left behind after the harvesters had gone through a field.

And Ruth knew about this, but she doesn't demand it, she humbly asks for it. She recognizes that as a foreigner she is incredibly low down the social ladder and she accepts this and comes respectfully. And she finds favor.

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There is a New Testament parallel to this story. It's actually an incredibly unique story – it's the only account in the Gospels where someone debates Jesus and wins.

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So there was this Canaanite woman, another foreigner, who was living in Israel. And she comes to Jesus asking Him to heal her demon possessed daughter.

But the thing with Jesus was that He spent essentially all His time with the Jews – Jesus came as the Jewish Messiah, it wasn't until after His resurrection that His disciples began to take His message to the Gentiles.

So He starts out ignoring her and then tries to send her away saying: "I was sent for the lost sheep of Israel." And then Jesus says something that sounds racist and harsh. He says "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

Now if you need to get angry about this go ahead – Jesus can handle it. But it's a mistake to think Jesus was a nice guy – He wasn't. He was passionately committed to His God-given mission and He would not allow anyone or anything to cause Him to deviate a single step from it. Now we don't like that because we think Jesus should be about us, but His first priority was to His Father's will.

And so I think at this point most of us would turn our backs and walk away "Fine Jesus, have it Your way. You are a waste of my time."

But this woman doesn't respond that way. She doesn't think Jesus is a waste of her time. She knows He is her daughter's only hope. And so from her knees she looks up and we read:

She replied, "That's true, Lord, but even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters' table."

(And this response of humble faith floors Jesus and He responds:)

"Dear woman," Jesus said to her, "your faith is great. Your request is granted." And her daughter was instantly healed. (Matthew 15:27-28)

Jesus was blown away when He encountered people who humbly believed that He was their only hope and approached Him asking for help. And this is the way Ruth approaches Boaz. She asks for what she needs, but she does it in without being presumptuous or pushy.

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And then in verses 8 and 9 Boaz approaches Ruth, and in spite of the fact that she is a foreigner he provides for her and protects her. He sets her up with the women who were working for him and directs all his employees not to give her trouble.

Now he doesn't do this just because Ruth is hot, though the author doesn't dispel that likelihood – and I think she probably was. But he does it because he is a godly man.

We know this because in verse 4, as Boaz arrives he greets his servants with a blessing in YHWH's name. Any time you come across the word "LORD" in the Old Testament and it is all capital letters this is God's name – YHWH. But the Jews wouldn't write that name down because it was too holy and they didn't know God personally like we do.

So this isn't just filler, everything in the story is there for a reason. And so here the author wants us to know that Boaz is running his business in a God-honouring way. He's living for God's glory, and now God is going to use him to be a blessing in Ruth's life. And it's going to work out alright for him too. Funny how that works. It's like a coincidence, but there is no coincidence here. God is at work.

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Now I want to extrapolate a parallel between the way Ruth approaches Boaz and the way we approach God. Often when we find ourselves in the dark we get angry at God. Often we complain that we deserve better – "I've been serving you faithfully God, I don't deserve what's going on in my life." Or we attempt to manipulate God by making deals "If you make this stop God then I'll go to Bible school."

But God is immune to our whining and He doesn't negotiate with terrorists. Instead He is gracious. You see the reality is that none of us deserve anything good from God. The Bible is clear that there aren't two kinds of people in the world, good people that God blesses because God helps those who help themselves and bad people who get what they deserve. The reality is there is one kind of people in the world. "All of us have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way."⁵ People are treasonous. All of us come to God as conniving sinners bent on our own glory. And God chooses to save some of us while we were yet sinners. That's grace.

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So how is it that Ruth gets something good from God? Why does she gain Boaz' favor? Is it because she works hard? Has she earned it? This is the question Ruth asks in verse 10: "Why have I found favor in your sight?"

And in verse 11 Boaz replies:

[Read Ruth 2:11]

⁵ Isaiah 53:6

So Boaz has noticed the good things Ruth has done, but that's not why she has his favor. If it worked like that then grace would be like wages that we earn from an employer – the harder we work at godliness the more grace we receive. But that's not the picture that Ruth is giving us. Look at verse 12:

[Read Ruth 2:12]

Boaz says the ultimate “good work” Ruth has done is take refuge under God's wings. She has come to Him for salvation.

And this is a picture we get throughout scripture. So David says:

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy!

I look to You for protection.

I will hide beneath the shadow of Your wings
until the danger passes by. (Psalm 57:1)

David was always hiding under God's wings for protection and asking for mercy he didn't deserve. And God loves this. God loves it when we recognize that we need Him. He doesn't need us, but He loves to be God in our lives.

Friends, why do we exist? God created us because He wanted to increase His glory by inviting other creatures to enjoy Him as God. That's why we exist. And so here Boaz says God is rewarding Ruth because she has sought refuge under His wings. She has trusted God for salvation.

But what's the evidence for this? Well she left Moab and her father and mother. She stepped outside what she knew and chose to make YHWH her God. And she has made Him her joy as well. In the midst of the dark she loves Him and worships Him. And she demonstrates this by coming to Boaz and to God honouring them by humbly admitting her need for their help.

You see God doesn't need you to work for Him. He isn't looking for employees to get stuff done. And He doesn't reward people for their work. He rewards us for our trust in Him. And our work is the evidence that we've done that. You see Jesus wants us to make Him God in our lives. And that means being astonished at the undeserved grace we have received from Him. It means treating that grace as exceedingly valuable.

And the way we do that is to leave Moab and father and mother and safety and mediocrity to pursue God's kingdom and His glory. When we do this we are proving that His Spirit is at work within us. Without God's Spirit in a person it is impossible to live for God's glory. So brothers and sisters, if you've received God's grace make running towards God the main trajectory of your life. Foster your hunger to worship Him in spite of the dark.

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You see another thing about God's grace is that it doesn't guarantee He is going to take you out of the dark – though sometimes that does happen. Sometimes God provides just when you've run out of money; sometimes He opens the door of opportunity you've been praying for; sometimes He gives the healing you need – and many of us have those stories.

But God's grace often means He is present with us as we walk through the dark. And godly people who have received His grace, and have His Holy Spirit working in them say: "God, my circumstances don't have to change for me to worship. You give and You take away, and I'm choosing to say 'May the name of the Lord be praised'. And I'm not just going to say this, I'm going to show that I've received your grace by working to this end. I'm going to throw myself and my abilities into working in your barley harvest

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So friends, God is in control, He is sovereign, and He is at work in the dark of our lives. And He is at work in this city whether people see His fingerprints or whether we struggle to ignore Him. His kingdom advances regardless.

But the blessing comes as we shelter ourselves under His wings. This is where grace is found. And the way we do this as individuals and as a church is, like Ruth, we need to boldly step outside our comfort zone. We need to leave the familiarity and safety of Moab behind, and look for where His barley harvest is happening. And then we need to throw ourselves into working to that end.

Our work won't earn God's grace, but it will be the evidence that we've thrown ourselves under His wings.

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If you weren't here last week, or just want a reminder, there is a sheet of paper by the door you can take home that outlines a barley harvest that the leaders here at Fort George/ Lighthouse feel God is opening for us. We don't think it's a coincidence. We see His fingerprints all over this. It's something we've been praying for for years, and now it is unfolding in front of us without us doing anything. And now it is time for us to jump in and work.