

Reviewing God's Performance

Ruth 2

I recently spoke to a friend who told me that
she'd just gone through her performance review.
Her boss had given her a mark out of ten,
she'd received 7 out of ten, for the past 12 months performance.

It's confronting isn't it? Having these performance reviews.
Before you receive the feedback
you have a number of questions which may worry you.
Will they have a fair understanding of what I actually do?
Will they consider the difficult circumstances that make my job hard?
And while it's not unusual to receive some sort of numerical indicator
it's a fair question to ask whether a year's work can be reduced to a number.
So these are the sorts of anxieties we might have as workers.

How would you feel about giving God a performance review?
If you were to sit down and assess how God is going as your chosen deity,
What feedback would you give?

What about his performance in providing atonement for you sins? Maybe 10 out 10:
Jesus provides complete atonement so, that deserves a good mark.

But what about his involvement in your life in the here and now?
Jesus says in Matthew 28 I will be with you always, even til the end of the age
That's the promise, is the reality more like he's taking extended lunch breaks,
that he's absent more than present? So maybe some explanation is in order.

We find ourselves wondering these things from time to time, don't we?
trying to balance up the claims of God's sovereign love and care,
with what we feel is a less than perfect reality.

Chapter 2 of Ruth opens with the issue of God's *providence* front and centre.
When we speak about God's providence we're speaking about
God's activity in steering the course of the world;
It's the idea that God is active in planning the route taken by the world
and also the route taken by those of us who live in it.

And the book of Ruth acts like a case study:
We see the nature of God's providence,
and we see the various reactions of the human players as they respond.

So before we are next tempted to hand God a negative performance review,
today's chapter affords us the opportunity

to understand more fully what God is achieving with his actions.
Before we give him a mark out of 10,
it might be a good idea to consider how it is that his providence works.

We'll start with the first 3 verses,

where the writer hints at the reality of God's providence

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz. ²And Ruth the Moabite 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." ³So 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.

From the outset Ruth's plan was to simply find a field, any field,
a field belonging to anyone she says,
provided it met two criteria,
a field where she was welcome and a field where she could pick up scraps.
As it turned out the author writes,
the field she finds is one belonging to Boaz

Was this really the happy coincidence suggested by the author?

I'm not sure that it was.

If you listen to the way that the characters speak,
There's an expectation that God is going to be active.

In Ch 1 Naomi sees God's hand at work against her,

while at the same time managing to pray

that the Lord will bless her two daughters.

Here in Ch 2 the characters invoke God's blessing upon each other.

Ruth is a story where the characters invite God to act,

And so we're not meant to see this as a mere coincidence.

The author is deliberately understating the case to make us pay attention.

We read verse 3 and find ourselves saying

"What? 'As it turned out?' Yeah right, this is no coincidence."

And so while Ruth may be thinking that she's received a lucky break,
we can see that it's not luck at all,
rather God is actually doing something.

It makes you wonder, doesn't it?

Perhaps random events might not be that random.

As one commentator had said regarding verse 3,

*"believers today would do well to observe similar accidents more closely;
perhaps they might find the same divine hand at work."*

And so Chapter 2 begins with this idea of God's active providence.

And I think this passage goes on to illustrate 4 things about God's providence;
4 things to remember before we pass judgment on how well God is doing.

The first is this: God uses human agents

When we pray for God to be active in our lives,
his answers might not come through a miracle.
His answers will normally come through some fairly ordinary looking means,
including our fellow brothers and sisters.

So Boaz enters the scene as one through whom God will do his work
God acts not with a blaze of light from heaven,
But through a guy from the nearest town: Bethlehem.
He's a man of standing but he's an ordinary man just the same.
And it's through his everyday work *and also through his godliness*
that God is answering people's prayers and providing for their needs.

Boaz was an employer, in verse 5 he speaks to his overseer,
in verse 8 he speaks about the women who work for him
so as a land owner he was providing employment for people.
This is God looking after the Israelites through a simple economic system.

Now Ruth comes along and asks to glean from his field.
Ruth is quite rightly taking advantage of an important OT law:
Land-owners were instructed to leave some of their fields unharvested
so that both the poor person and the foreigner (someone like Ruth)
could gather up some of the harvest if needed.
It seems that Boaz was upholding this law,
which was all about the rich providing for the poor out of their own bounty.

So this is the way God answers the cries of his people: he uses human agents.
If you've ever wondered why it is that there is so much poverty in the world,
It's sobering to realise that the problem isn't with God,
the problem is with us rich people who are deaf to God's instructions,
deaf to God's command to share what we have. [Anglican Aid opportunity]

So this is the first thing to say about God's providence:
it's exercised through us and our relationships with one-another.

Here's the second thing:
God's providence is not always immediately obvious

Now, right from the first verse of Ch 2,
we know that Ruth is in the right field,
and we suspect Boaz is going to be significant.
But Ruth doesn't find out the true significance of her chosen field until v20.
It's only then as Naomi reveals who Boaz is
That, along with Ruth, we see his ability to save them long term.
So the significance of God's action is *not immediately* clear.

It may be that the reasons for God's particular actions are *never* revealed to us.
As we'll find out in Ch 4, the story doesn't end with Boaz marrying Ruth.
The story ends with a genealogy, hinting at their significant descendants.
I don't think Ruth Naomi and Boaz could see that far ahead;
They probably died unaware of what God would do within their family.
I mean they receive a blessing in Ch 4 regarding their family,
But did they expect that blessing to be fulfilled in an Israelite King (David),
and then ultimately in a divine Messiah? Probably not.

When Jas and I were in France I was struck by the size of some of the churches.
These are buildings that took generations to build, sometimes centuries.
And it dawned upon me that most of the architects and builders only lived to
see a small part of the project completed.

I think our lives are like that.
We only ever get to see a small part of what God is doing.
Only a small part of the effects that our words have,
A small part of the impact of our generosity.
We may not see all the reasons why God opens one door and closes another.

Ruth's story teaches us that there's a bigger picture beyond what we can see.
And for Ruth and her friends that picture wouldn't become complete
until centuries later with the arrival of the Messiah.

Now speaking of the Messiah,
the third point we can deduce about God providence
is that it is ultimately geared towards *his plan of redemption*.

Let's think a little more about Boaz.
We are told he is from *Bethlehem*.
This may not have meant as much to the OT readers as it does to us today,
But of course when we hear the name Bethlehem,
we think of Jesus who was born there many centuries later.

In verse 20 Naomi reveals to Ruth that Boaz is a *guardian-redeemer*.
The Bibles that you have in the pews have a useful footnote.
At the bottom of the page were told that Boaz as a relative
'*who has the obligation to redeem a relative in serious difficulty*'.
If an Israelite found themselves in hardship
they could sell themselves into slavery as a short term survival measure,
and then a relative could come and *redeem* them;
the relative could pay a *ransom* to buy back Israelite's freedom,
and Boaz was one such relative.

Skip forward to the NT and we hear Jesus describe himself as a ransom for many.
Jesus, the one from Bethlehem,

becomes the ultimate redeemer;
rescuing us from the slavery of sin, death and the coming judgment.

So with NT eyes we see that the story of Ruth
is one that prefigures God's ultimate act of redemption.

And not only does the story *prefigure* that act,
But the events of Ruth actually *do something* to prepare the way.
It's no surprise to you that Ruth and Boaz get together
(Ch 2 has us suspecting that anyway),
and the purpose of their union is to conceive a child
who would be an ancestor of Jesus himself.

So as God acts in Ruth's life, what is he achieving?
What is his Key Performance Indicator?
Is it to make Ruth as comfortable as possible? No.
The ultimate aim of his activity
is to bring about the cosmic act of redemption we see in Jesus.

This is what God's providence is all about:
it's about calling out and redeeming his people.

The apostle Paul knew all about this.
If you remember from our series in Philippians earlier this year,
Paul wrote Philippians while he was under house arrest.
That's a situation that would cause many of us to question God's goodness.
But how does Paul understand his predicament?
Oh he says, I can see God at work, even here in prison!
Everyone here has heard about Jesus.
Paul could see that his God-ordained circumstances
meant salvation for others,
and so from this Paul derives strength to endure his hardship.

But while being a part of God's grand plan offers some comfort,
What about the little day-to-day stuff
that might not seem as important as the salvation of the world,
but are important to us nonetheless?
Does God's providence extend to the small stuff?
I think the answer is *Yes*;
God's providence is not simply *purposeful but personal*.

Boaz could have simply allowed Ruth to glean
and Ruth could have collected enough to survive with that alone,
but you get this picture of Boaz doing a lot more than what was required:
He orders his workers to pull out stalks and leave them behind;
He invites Ruth to share a meal with him and she takes the leftovers home;

The writer makes a point in verse 18 of mentioning how Ruth presented
Namoi with the leftovers;
a ready made meal; no need to wait for the milling and baking to take place.
It's a picture of small mercies being added as God fulfils the big picture.

So I think it's a mistake to think that God only cares about the big stuff;
He's interested in us personally, just as Boaz took an interest in both women
How does Jesus describe it? "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a
stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹If you, then, though you are evil, know
how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good
gifts to those who ask him!
This is truth that Ruth experienced,
And it's a truth that each of us will come to know
as we continue to place our trust in the very same God.

So this then is how God's providence works.
The question remains as to how we are to respond,
and I think the two women at the centre of our story show us the way.

Many scholars have noticed a difference between Namoi's response and Ruth's.
At the chapter's beginning Namoi seems so embittered that she cannot act.
Naomi stays at home while Ruth is out trying to make something happen.
And I think that's the model for us to follow.
As she commits herself to the God of Israel, Ruth decides to get busy,
she hatches her own plan trusting that God's plan will emerge.
She's not frozen. God's providence doesn't mean we are passive. We act.

And along side Ruth's decision to get moving,
you notice that there's a lot of praying going on?
Not so much Ruth, but *Naomi* is continually calling on God, albeit unhappily,
but she's calling on God nonetheless
Prayer is a way God involves us in his plan.

So when times are tough, here's a call to action:
keep praying and keep moving as God works out his plan.

This is not a case of *God helping those who help themselves*.
You may have heard people put it like that,
I think that puts too much of an emphasis on us,
but rather it's a case of God's children responding in trust
to the God who is always acting and involving us in his purposes.

And so let's spend a few moments in prayer right now.