

And So It Happened

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- [0 : 0 0] is there such a thing as coincidence? Was it a coincidence that 30 years ago I applied to go to Free Church Youth Camp in the Borders at the same time as, unbeknown to me, a young lady called Kathmer McCray applied to go to the same youth camp as a cook?
- Was it a coincidence that three years ago, the day after the Glasgow City Conjugation had voted to leave the city centre, the roof of our church building fell down?
- Is there such a thing as coincidence? Did these things just happen by chance? Or is there more going on than meets the eye?
- Are they all, in fact, God's plan? Was it a coincidence that 3,000 years ago a young Moabite woman called Ruth met and married a Jewish exile?
- Was it a coincidence that Ruth followed her mother-in-law Naomi back to Israel? Was it a coincidence that when Ruth went out into the fields to glean among the ears of grain, she just happened upon the field of Boaz?
- [1 : 2 6] Did all these things happen by chance? Or is it all God's plan? The book of Ruth reminds us, God has a purpose for everything that happens in our lives as Christians, even in the most unexpected of places and at the most unexpected of times.
- When in verse 3 we read these words, and she happened, we are meant to read between the lines and realise, actually in this story, nothing happened by chance.
- God was at work. It's not random happenstance, it's God's providence. Now there are three themes in our chapter which teach us that God has a deeper purpose in everything that takes place in our lives every day.
- First, it so happened that there was faithfulness in unfaithfulness. Second, it so happened that there was a rose among thorns. And third, it so happened that there was a purpose in pain.
- The message is clear. Nothing that happens to any one of us this evening is coincidental. But our loving, wise, and almighty Heavenly Father is working all these things together for our good and for His glory.
- [3 : 0 1] Yes, even the bad bits. So first of all this evening we have, and it so happened, that there was faithfulness in unfaithfulness.
- There was faithfulness in unfaithfulness. Now, although ultimately God is the hero in the book of Ruth, it features two outstanding people, Boaz and Ruth.
- Our chapter begins by focusing on Boaz. We read, Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.
- Here's a man of honor and reputation. What's strange about verse 1 is its historical context. Even though the book of Ruth comes immediately after the book of Judges in the Bible, they're going on at the same time.
- Judges contains the records of the famous leaders of Israel, such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. We often think of these figures and the times in which they lived as the high points in the history of Israel.

[4 : 11] But they were anything bad. As we read through the book of Judges, we discover periods of deep national unfaithfulness to God. There are invasions of foreign armies caused by the people's rejection of God.

The judges themselves were not good people. In fact, when you reach the later judges like Jephthah and Samson, the way they operate is entirely as bad or even worse than the pagan nations around them.

The Levites were supposed to be the teachers of Israel, the ministers of Israel, proclaiming to the people God's covenant love and urging them to faithfulness.

But towards the end of Judges, we learn that the Levites had become entirely useless. And the book of Judges ends on a desperately, desperately tragic note.

Judges 21-25. In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Everyone did in Israel what was right in his own eyes.

[5 : 24] So from top to bottom, from king to commoner, Israel's in chaos. That's the historical context for all the events which happen in Ruth. But what's remarkable about Ruth is you would never know it from the way in which Boaz operates or is described.

Here we have a faithful man in the heart of an unfaithful society. Here is life in death and beauty in ugliness.

He is not doing what is right in his own eyes as the rest of Israel is. He is doing what's right in God's eyes. And it's a lesson for us that even in the heart of our unfaithful society, we can choose to be faithful to God.

Though everyone around us is doing what's right in their own eyes, we can choose the path of faithfulness to God. Like a salmon swimming upstream against the current, we can go against the flow just like Jesus did in his own day.

Boaz was a faithful man. And briefly, this shows itself up in three ways in our chapter. First, Boaz believed God's promise.

[6 : 46] Boaz believed God's promise. From verse one, we learn that Boaz was a relative of Naomi's husband, Elimelech. Now, if you remember from the last time, Elimelech and his family had left Bethlehem many years before because there had been a famine in Israel.

They had left the promised land and they'd settled in Moab. Elimelech, his name means God is king. But he didn't believe that God was king.

He didn't believe that God would provide for his family in the promised land. So he took matters into his own hands and left. There in Moab, Elimelech died.

And then a great famine hit Moab. By contrast, his relative Boaz chose not to leave Bethlehem. He believed that even though there was a famine in Israel, God would provide for him and his household so he did not take matters into his own hands.

But believing in God's promise, stayed. Elimelech didn't believe God's promise and left.

[8 : 00] Boaz did believe God's promise and stayed. Out of the two men, who fared best in the end? The man who didn't believe in God's promise or the man who did?

In Ruth chapter 2, Boaz is struggling to keep up with the fruitfulness of the harvest. Boaz is proof, if ever we needed it, that faith in the promises of God, even when it seems most unlikely, will always be rewarded.

Tell me, what are the promises of God you're struggling to keep hold of this evening? Rather than take matters into your own hands, let's pray for faith to cling to these promises and keep trusting God.

The second way in which we know that Boaz was a very faithful man was he loved God's law. Boaz loved God's law.

Well, Ruth set out that day to glean or pick up the leftover harvest that the harvesters had left behind. Although the nation of Israel were very far away from God at this time, Ruth found the field of Boaz and gleaned there.

[9 : 21] It was written into the law of the land that when Israelites harvested crops from their fields, they were to leave some unharvested crops at the edges of their field for the poor and for strangers.

We find this in Leviticus chapter 19. Now, we can't speak for Boaz's neighbors, but we can speak for him. He commanded his workers to obey the Mosaic law and to leave enough crops at the edge of his field so that the strangers and the poor could glean something for themselves.

Boaz is showing that though the law of God may matter little to the nation of Israel, it matters to him. Boaz could have made himself richer by denying the Mosaic right of gleaning and harvesting everything, but he chose to obey God because clearly he loved God's law.

The law of God is not a cold set of rules. It's the expression of love for God and love for one's vulnerable neighbor. Boaz loved God's law and showed it by loving God enough to love strangers who came to pick up ears of grain in his fields and oftentimes to show them more than ordinary generosity.

Jesus once said, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you. And we too can express our love for God by loving the stranger among us, by showing kindness to the undeserving.

[11 : 03] How are we in our daily lives expressing our love for God and for his word? And then the third way in which we recognize that Boaz was a faithful man was that he rejoiced in faithfulness.

He rejoiced in faithfulness. For all that Boaz was a great man in Bethlehem, he was also a very compassionate man. When he found out that the Moabite woman who was gleaning in his field was Ruth, he was delighted.

In verses 11 and 12, which are the centerpiece of this chapter really, he says, Boaz rejoiced in Ruth's faithfulness, and rewarded her by protecting her from harm and giving her extra grain and inviting her to share his table with him.

He wasn't impressed by the unfaithfulness of the nation of Israel, but he was deeply impressed by the faithfulness of this young Moabite woman, Ruth. He rejoiced in and rewarded her faithfulness.

There may have been a little bit of family loyalty here, but more than that, clearly Boaz admired Ruth for all that she'd done. Now, none of us go into the Christian life for rewards because after all, it's all of grace.

[12 : 52] And yet, along the way, God does reward faithfulness. It may not be in ways we can see, but Jesus himself said, everyone who has left houses, brothers and sisters, father or mother, children or fields because of my name, will receive a hundred times more in this life and inherit eternal life.

Boaz rewarded Ruth for her faithfulness to God, and the truth is, we will never be the losers for being faithful to God. We will never be the losers for being faithful to God.

So, all in all, Boaz comes across as an outstanding man who deserves his title in verse 1 as a worthy man. Commentators over the centuries compare him with Jesus.

They've made him an Old Testament type of Christ. And as we go further into the book of Ruth next week, we'll discover why. At the very least, he's a description of a righteous person, the kind of people that by grace we too aspire to be.

Though we may live in an unfaithful society, though we may be placed here, and we may think it's by chance, but it's not, yet we resolve through faith in Jesus to be different, to be just like Boaz.

[14 : 19] And it so happened that there was faithfulness in unfaithfulness. Well, then secondly, it so happened that there was a rose among thorns.

A rose among thorns. Is it just random coincidence? The roll of the dice? That as we read in verse 3, Ruth happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz?

The Boaz, who was perhaps one of the most faithful men in Israel? It wasn't happenstance at all. It was God's gracious guidance at work.

Naomi and Ruth had returned to Israel not having a clue what lay before them. They must have worried that they would starve. Humanly speaking, they were in a dangerous situation. When Ruth left that morning to go to the fields to glean, would she be successful?

Or would she return home empty-handed, bruised and battered at the hands of the harvesters, who were, by and large, aggressive young men? There's just so much uncertainty, but not when God's at work, graciously guiding and providing for her.

[15 : 43] Providentially, not randomly, she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz. God led her to the safest place in all of Israel where she could glean safely and freely.

If ever we needed proof that nothing happens by chance for God's people, here's it. That the safest place in the whole world is in the heart of God's gracious will for us.

The safest place in the whole world is in the heart of God's gracious will for us. God has shown Ruth grace and favor.

He has shown us grace by saving us from our sin and guilt. He has shown us grace by adopting us as His beloved sons and daughters in Christ, as Hannah spoke about this morning. Now, what will we do with that grace?

Will we lie back and do nothing with it? Or will we, in oldie, worldly language, improve upon it?

[16 : 50] In the language of Paul in Ephesians chapter 2, having been saved by grace, will we do the works God has prepared beforehand for us to do? I sometimes wonder whether the writer of Proverbs chapter 31, in his discussion of the characteristics of a virtuous woman, was painting a word portrait of Ruth.

She, who was of foreign blood, had pledged herself to following Naomi and Naomi's God. In Boaz's language, in verse 12, she had come to find refuge under the wings of the Lord God of Israel.

In verse 2, she takes the initiative and suggests to her mother-in-law that she goes out to work in the fields. And then she goes and she works and she works and she works. We read it in verse 7, she continued to glean from early morning without a rest.

And as we pass on to verse 17, she keeps reaping until it gets dark. Ruth's a person not just of passion and integrity, but a person of industry. She works hard and then at the end of the chapter, we read that every day until the end of the barley and wheat harvests, she keeps working.

She's working in the heat of the day, but she's working and she's working hard. It's back-breaking work, reaching down to pull up a few grains here and a few grains there, but she's making the most of the opportunity God has given her.

[18 : 25] She realizes from verse 10 that she's being shown favor by this man, Boaz. That word favor is literally the Old Testament word for grace.

Remember Shanon who used to be part of our work in St. Vincent Street? That's the Old Testament word for grace. Chain.

Boaz is showing favor favor to Ruth, but ultimately it's not Boaz. It's God who is showing grace and favor to Ruth. And she makes the most of that grace by her industry, so much so that in verse 17, in the first day, she gleaned an ephah of barley, which is roughly 22 liters.

Now, one liter might have been enough to supply their need for a day, but she's gathered 20 times that and more in one day. What are we going to do with the grace God has shown us in the dying and rising of His Son, Jesus?

What are we going to do with that super abundant grace God has shown us in saving us from our sins and giving us eternal life in Him? In Mark chapter 4, Jesus tells that famous parable of the sower and the seed, where the seed planted in good ground produces a harvest a hundred times that which was sown.

[19 : 49] He also tells a parable about the talents and about how the man to whom He had given five talents invested wisely and made a healthy return. What's the message for us if it's not to build upon the grace God has showered upon us and dedicate ourselves to work for His kingdom, to no longer live for ourselves but for Him, to seize the opportunities that by grace He has given us?

Seen from the notice sheet that there is space on the welcome and hospitality rota. Could we do that?

Saying hello to visitors as they come in off the street? There's a call for prayer. Could we do that? There's need for personal holiness and devotion to God.

Can we do that? The message of Ruth 2 is that there are no coincidences but that God is graciously and lovingly and wisely guiding our footsteps. Can we work with this?

Can we build on this? And yes, even though that might mean being led and guided into dark valleys, can we make the most of even that by learning the lessons God has for us there?

[21 : 13] And it so happened that there was a rose among thorns. And then lastly, and it so happened that there was a purpose in pain.

There was a purpose in pain. The book of Ruth is many things, but chief among them is that it's a touching love story.

It tells of the growing romance between Ruth and Boaz, which eventually leads to the birth of a son. And that son will be the grandfather of King David.

And over the generations, the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, the genetic descendant of Boaz and Ruth. Ruth's a touching love story.

It really is. And yet, Ruth is also full of pain, of untimely death, of poverty, of risk, of fear, vulnerability, and fragility.

[22 : 23] It might be a touching story at the end, but at the beginning, there's tragedy. Ruth would never have been anywhere near Boaz had it not been for the death of her husband in Moab.

For all that, we go back to the words of verse 3 that Ruth happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Moab. We must realize it was pain that had brought her to this place.

The pain of bereavement and loss. The pain of becoming an alien and a refugee in a foreign land. And yet, the man who owned this field was a close relative of her father-in-law.

And as such, as we learn from verse 20, qualified to be a family redeemer. We'll come to that later on when we get to Ruth 3 and 4. For the first time in this whole story, there's a glimmer of light and hope.

The man into whose field Ruth happened to stumble is one of the only people in the world who could change the situation Ruth and Naomi were facing. She could have happened to stumble into the fields of any other farmer in Bethlehem.

[23 : 35] Nothing would have changed. She'd have spent the rest of her life picking up little bits of grain from the harvests of others. She'd always have been poor, vulnerable and insecure.

But she happened into the field of one of the most faithful men of Israel and one of the only people in the whole world who could do anything to change her situation.

There's no coincidence here. There's only the loving guidance of God. The message for us is this. There is a deeper purpose in the pain Ruth and Naomi went through.

We have the tragedy of bereavements in Moab. We have the uncertainty of living as a refugee in Israel. God has a higher purpose in it all.

If at the time you'd asked Ruth what that purpose was, she'd have thrown up her hands and said, you tell me, I don't have a clue. It was only when she looked back sometime later that she'd been able to trace God's wise and loving hand in it all.

[24 : 46] Isn't that often the way it is? When we're in the middle of a period of pain, we throw up our hands and we don't have a clue what God's doing in our lives.

But it's only after some years when we look back we can see his wise and loving purpose for our greater good and his highest glory.

But it wasn't as if God was dispassionately playing a game of chess with our lives. It was more that in his love and grace and wisdom he was weaving a tapestry of his grace in us and through us which led to the most wonderful artwork.

Ruth's great grandson King David wrote Psalm 23 but at the end he said goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

The thing is that we only see things that follow us when we look behind us. That's what Ruth too is calling us to do. To look back and see that nothing has happened in our lives by chance.

[26 : 01] Nothing. Not the good things not the bad things not the pleasurable things not the painful things. The loving and wise hand of our almighty father has been carefully guiding and charting our path so that his sovereign grace becomes obvious to us and to everyone else.

have you ever looked back and seen God's hand at work? When the Jewish religious authorities crucified Jesus they thought they'd put an end to him but in law God's loving and wise plan the pain Jesus endured served only to launch God's greatest ever purpose for humankind that through the pain of Jesus an innumerable multitude of sinful men and women would be saved and have eternal life with him.

There were no coincidences at Calvary and there are no coincidences in your life not one. God's at work even in your pain.

all that's left for us as a result of what we learn from Ruth chapter 2 is to trust God to trust God to trust him in the light and to trust him in the dark to trust him in the pleasure and to trust him in the pain as the apostle Paul would later say if God did not spare his one and only son but gave him up for us all how will he not along with him freely give us all things?

Our father never disappoints. Trust in him wait patiently for him that is purpose in everything.

[28 : 14] even though in our eyes it just seemed to happen that way. Two thousand years ago a small hill outside the city of Jerusalem things just seemed to happen that way as our Lord was marched up the hill nailed to a cruel cross and put to death.

But what happened that day was the eternal plan of God for the redemption of his church. There was no coincidence on Calvary it was God's wise and loving plan that his son should give himself as the sacrifice for our sin.

And this evening as we engage in bread and wine, the sacrament of the Holy Communion we remember the depth of God's love for us in that the Son of God gave himself for us according to the divine plan from eternity.

Yes, he loved us. As we look into the mirror sometimes we wonder to ourselves what is there about me God loves and we realize well not very much at all.

What is there about me rather that should merit God's love? And that's when we say not very much. We struggle sometimes to love ourselves and yet the word tells us that God loves us with an infinite, eternal, unchangeable love and demonstrated that for us by Jesus pouring out his blood represented by the wine and Jesus giving his body represented by the bread.

[30 : 06] God maybe some of us tonight are in that place where we're struggling to understand what God is doing in our lives and we're clinging on by our fingertips. What we have here in this meal is Jesus offering us strength to keep clinging on until he reveals to us the purpose of what's going on in our lives.

Keep clinging on and keep going. This is a strengthening ordinance where he gives us grace so we may keep going on and keep on trusting him. So this is for us all, for all who trust in Jesus, for all who want to trust in Jesus, that we too, like Ruth and like Boaz, as we look back might say, when I needed extra strength, I found it on Sunday the 19th of May 2024 in the evening when I drank wine and ate bread with God's people.

He river and Met six water to're going to go on to sigh, Todd Ru and Peter