

Chapter 4: How To Seek Favor

Ruth 2:1-3

This Week's Prayer
Requests:

Memory Verse: "Let not mercy and truth forsake you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart, And so find favor and high esteem In the sight of God and man." Prov. 3:3-4

Text: "Now they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. There was a relative of Naomi's husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech. His name was Boaz. So Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, 'Please let me go to the field, and glean heads of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor.'

And she said, to her, 'Go, my daughter.'

Then she left, and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers. And she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech."

Monday

What is grace?

As we move to Ruth chapter 2, we come to a chapter where the central theme is this idea of "favor." At the beginning of the chapter we see Ruth getting ready to go out to the fields to find some food and she says to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field, and glean heads of grain after him [or after one] in whose sight I may find favor." Then in verse 10 we read, "So she fell on her face, bowed down to the ground, and said to him, 'Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner.'" Then the idea appears again in verse 13, "Let me find favor in your sight, my lord..." And finally though the word isn't used again, the idea appears in verse 19, "Blessed be the one who took notice of you."

Is grace by its nature something owed? If not, why not?

Favor, that is the refrain of this chapter. What is favor? The Hebrew word used here is the word "chen" from "chanan" which we sometimes translate another way and that is with the word, "grace." It carries with it the idea of freeness and liberty on the one who bestows it. In other words, it isn't owed, there's no obligation, it isn't a right or anything like that. Rather it is a gift, a freely bestowed gift, as a heartfelt response to someone who is in need.

So as we begin looking at the beginning of this chapter, we see some principles about how to seek favor/grace, or how to put yourself in the path of receiving favor.

How would you feel, waking up in the morning and finding yourself in Ruth's circumstances?

But first, let's sort of get a picture in our minds of what is happening. Ruth wakes up that first day in Bethlehem after their journey and she no doubt suddenly faces some painful realities as she opens her eyes, looks at the ceiling and reminds herself where she is and what has happened. She is a fairly recent widow. She faces the loss of her husband and the loneliness of that tragic event. She is a stranger in a foreign land, a long way from home, a long way from friends and family, and a long way from all that is familiar. She has little or no resources, having been reduced essentially to the status of a beggar which we see in this chapter very clearly. Her only accessible friend and family in all the world is her elderly mother-in-law to whom she has made her vow, and she must find a way to help and provide for her. And speaking of that, there is the whole issue of food and the question, "What are we going to eat?"

What would you do?

So faced with these painful realities Ruth does the only sensible thing for a person in her circumstance to do, she gets out of bed and goes to see what she can make of the day.

Her first thought, then, after she splashes water on her face and gets ready to face her circumstances is to go and glean in the fields. Now why does she decide to do this? That's a good question. The reason, I believe, is that she knows the provisions that the God of Israel, whom she has put her trust in and has now come to find refuge in, that the God of Israel has made provisions in Israel just for people just like her.

He had told the nation that whenever they reaped a harvest, God's people were to consider the poor and leave gleanings for them. We can read about this in Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22; and Deut. 24:19-22. He even told them not to reap all the way into the corners of the fields, but to leave those portions for the poor. Nor was the harvester allowed to go back through the fields a second time and pick up what had been dropped or left in the initial pass through the fields. Now these restrictions were reasonable for God to give, of course, because He gave the harvest and He had every right to tell His people how to use it. What do these laws tell us about God?

They show that God was concerned for the poor among His people. They were to treat them with honesty and fairness (Ex. 23:3, 6; Lev. 19:15). They were to treat them with generosity (Lev. 19:9-10).

God was also concerned for widows, many of whom were poor, and He told the people to care for them in Ex. 22:22-24. Furthermore, God was concerned for the aliens, the foreigners among His people for whom He also made provision (e.g. Lev. 19:33-34). And so Ruth, who was poor, a widow, and an alien had every reason to look to God in hope for His help and provision. It is said of God in Deuteronomy 10:18, “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing.”

Because she has some knowledge of this provision by God and she has some hope of finding someone in the area who also loves God and is ready to live in obedience to His command, she steps out in faith and says, “Please let me go to the field, and glean heads of grain.” This brings us to the first principle in this text about how to properly seek favor from God in any matter whether it is as mundane as finding your daily food or as momentous as marrying a particular person. It is this:

1. Put your faith in the word of God (v. 2).

To live by faith means to believe what God has said in His word in such a way that governs your behavior and you act upon it for “faith without works” is not true faith, but “dead” according to James 2:20. Ruth takes a step of faith. By faith, she gets up in the morning, washes her face, and as a poor widow and foreigner goes out to glean in the fields.

What steps of faith might God be calling you to take today, as you read His word?

Tuesday

This brings us then to the second principle for finding favor. And note: we are not talking about the favor of men here, but it is ultimately the favor of God that concerns us just as it did Ruth.

How can you tell the difference between those who exercise honest efforts and those who do not?

2. Exercise honest efforts (v.2).

You will no doubt notice that God's provision for the poor, which we saw from Leviticus yesterday, required some effort on their part to receive it. It wasn't that he had people walking through the town with buckets of grain, giving handouts to people that simply didn't want to work. This wasn't a social welfare program, where if you didn't want to work you just hung around and expected that eventually someone would come by and give you stuff which other people were working very, very hard to get. No, God made a wonderful provision for the poor, because it demanded that they make honest efforts to get it. If they did so, then they were rewarded that both met their need and preserved their dignity.

Alistair Beg says, "Impudence and greediness on the part of the poor expose them to a justifiable contempt and neglect."

He is correct. I've got every distinction in my own mind between the individual to whom I am prepared to give money or buy a meal and the individual whom I will walk past and give no money and buy no meal. So for example, I walk past a man on the Street of New York with a bucket and a harmonica, or I walk past the teenager from Italy who is dancing in central park, or I walk past the man on the street of Columbia Missouri, who is drawing portraits with stubby pencils and a spiral notebook, and maybe they aren't very good, but at least they are trying to do something to earn their bread. They are entertaining. They are trying to give to others. Such people are in line with Scripture. They are making honest efforts and so they are due their bread.

I've got a distinction in my mind between that person and the sodden drunk who simply sits there with his eyes glazed over and an empty cup waiting for a handout so he can go in the local convenience store and get another beer, or the guy who simply holds up a sign, "veteren", or even worse the guy who comes up and says, "Hey, hey, hey, can you spare some change" and then tries to induce guilt when you keep going. That is nothing but just raw and ugly impudence.

So we see, Beloved, that when God provides for the poor, there is

tremendous wisdom in His provision. He doesn't want the poor to suffer. Jesus says, "You will always have the poor with you." So we do not neglect the poor. But neither do we demean the poor by catering to willful indolence, laziness or sloth. No, these are men and women created in the image of God, fallen as it is. They are our co-stewards of this grand creation. God says to them in effect, "You can eat, but as long as you are physically able to do so you must at least get up, get out in the field and do something for your food. Otherwise, if anyone will not work, neither shall he eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). To say otherwise and to cater to slothfulness is to demean men and women created in the image of God.

Ruth gets up and gets out of bed. She is not discouraged to the point of inaction. Neither is she prideful or clinging to some ridiculous entitlement mentality. Instead she rubs the sleep out of her eyes, thinks about the possible courses of action facing her and says, "Please let me go to the field and glean heads of grain" In doing so, she exercises honest efforts and puts herself in the proper place to receive favor from God.

What efforts is God asking you to exercise in your life and ministry? How can you move forward in the circumstance He has set before you this day?

Wednesday

We come now to a third principle for how to seek favor from God revealed in this text:

3. Give respect to whom respect is due (v. 2).

When Ruth gets up in the morning, she doesn't look at her mother-in-law and say, "Now what have you got planned for me?" Neither does she ask Naomi to join her. She doesn't say, "Naomi, I think the two of us ought to get out in the fields and pick up some of that left over grain."

How does Ruth reveal her respect for Naomi in these verses?

She doesn't do that. Rather she says, "Naomi, if it's okay with you, I would like to go out into the fields and pick up the left over grain."

Why?

In a word: Respect.

"Honor your father and mother" (Ex. 20:12). "Render therefore to all their due ... honor to whom honor" (Rom. 13:7). Naomi had lived longer. Naomi had endured more. Naomi had suffered more. Naomi was due some rest in a way that Ruth, who was younger was not. And so she says, "I will go there if it's alright with you." I will labor in the heat of the day. I will risk being ostracized as a foreigner. I will risk the potential danger of physical abuse from the men in the fields. Was there a potential for that? Absolutely. Why do you think Boaz is careful to command the young men not to touch her? Why is he so insistent later in this chapter that she stay near his maidens and his servants and not wander to someone else's field? Why does he tell his men not to reproach or rebuke her and let them know in no uncertain terms that she is under his protection? Because there is a very real danger to her.

Who will look out for Ruth if something happens to her? Who will come to her defense? She doesn't have a father, or husband or sons in these parts. This is a lawless time and there is no community or family available to be avengers of blood for Ruth like there was with the other women. She can't pull out the cell phone and dial 911 to get the police. Moreover, if something does happen to her and she is still alive, there would be no recourse to a court of law, a noble or a king to protect her rights. There is no one to defend her, and everybody knows this. She is completely vulnerable.

This is a very precarious situation. But Ruth is willing to risk and to risk alone in order that she might fulfill an obligation to Naomi which she believes God has laid upon her. Because when she made her beautiful vow in chapter 1, Ruth knew that it meant a lot of things, and on that particular morning it meant asking permission to go out to the fields alone and glean grain while Naomi stayed back. Respect.

One commentator reflecting on this verse said, "Young persons should be cheerfully willing to bear fatigues and troubles for the sake of their aging parents. A young woman cheerfully laboring for her aging parents is far happier than a fashionable lady spending in idleness and dissipation the fruits of the industry of her ancestors." That's a very

practical lesson from this verse. Many of us have parents that are in the phase of life now that Naomi was in; and I hope that none of us are waking up in the morning and say, “Now what are you going to do for me today Mom, Dad?”

How can you give honor to whom honor is due this day and put yourself in a position to receive favor from God?

Thursday

Today we want to consider a fourth principles from these verses for seeking favor from God:

How important is attitude when a person is hoping to seek undeserved favor and kindness from others?

4. Move out in humility rather than pride (v. 2).

The job that Ruth was getting up and going out to do, Beloved, was not a nice job. No, it was a hot job. It was a dirty job, and even worse, it was a humiliating job. One preacher I listened to on this passage compared it to collecting aluminum cans.

We don't see much of that anymore, because they stopped giving back the deposits on aluminum cans. But the summer before my Freshman year of college, I worked in the produce department of a grocery store. It was a fine job, much better than the one Ruth was reduced to doing. I prepared the produce and got it out on the shelves. But there was one aspect of the job that I absolutely despised, and it was that the produce department workers were responsible for handling the recycling that various customers brought to the store.

Now almost everyday, there would be a few people, who would come in toting large garbage sacks of aluminum cans that they had “gleaned” from various places around the city. I would have to put on large rubber gloves, open the bags, count out the cans and place them in flats to give them their deposit, five cents a can. It was smelly. It was sticky.

Should our attitude be any different when we are hoping to find favor from God?

Sometimes the odor would make you want to gag. But we counted out the cans and we doled out the money, and the people, often clothed in rags, would walk away with a few dollars in their pocket to show for their hours and hours of nasty work, walking around the city. These people were just barely eeking out an existence with these cans. This is exactly the kind of hard work and level of subsistence that Ruth was setting out to do that morning.

In other words, there's no prestige in this. She's not even at the level of one of the routine harvesters or gleaners. She's not part of an employed group. She comes along when everyone else is gone to nose around and pick up the bits and pieces. And what this Scripture really does is point out to us how wonderful Ruth's attitude in this whole situation is. She's not going out here on the basis of her rights. She's definitely not some kind of prima donna, who's concerned about her complexion and her nails. She is simply going out in a humble hope of finding favor, grace, the ability to follow along behind someone who won't throw something at her and chase her off or worse, stooping down and doing a very hard job. Humility ... love ... industry ... a peaceful quiet spirit, what a marvelous person this Ruth is!

She's going out to find grace, and she is teaching us here by her attitude and by her actions that everything that God gives any of us and every opportunity that we have obtaining what we need are undeserved mercies from the Giver of every good gift. When a person actually believes that and has that written into the corner of his or her heart, then it will transform how he approaches any task.

Every day, everything that God gives to us and every opportunity of obtaining what we need is an undeserved expression of God's favor. So we can go out in humility and live with a heart and an attitude that is utterly scandalous in an ungodly society that is too preoccupied with its so-called rights.

Does your attitude need any adjustments today as you reflect on Ruth's heart toward her work and ministry to Naomi? Spend some time in prayer now asking God to reveal any changes He might want you to make in your own spirit.

Friday

On our final day this week, we want to mention two more principles for seeking favor from God. This fifth in our study is also drawn from verse two, namely:

Consider Prov. 11:14; and 15:22.

Do we see these verses played out in Ruth's life? In what ways?

5. Listen to the sensible advice of those who care for you most (v. 2).

I get this principle from the fact that Ruth asked for Naomi's permission. Note the first word of her statement, "Please," "Please let me ..." Naomi responds, "Go ahead my daughter." I'm sure she said it with a kind of wistful sadness, a wishing if you will, that things could be different, that things could be better for Ruth, that she didn't have to go out and spend her day like this, or all of the following days for that matter. I'm sure she said it with a kind of sad resignation in her voice.

Don't miss the fact that Ruth poses this as a request to Naomi as if she's seeking her advice on the matter. "If you think this is a good idea, this is my plan for today." In other words, she found the will of God in desiring the sensible advice of those who loved her best. Do you know how many tragedies and disasters in this life would be avoided if people would simply pay attention to the advice of those who care for them most, especially young people?

Why does Ruth follow Naomi's advice in chapters 2 & 3, but not chapter 1? What is the difference?

Beloved, do not believe that some miraculous intervention of God is propelling you down some crazy path when all of those who love you most and know God personally - that is an important qualifier - tell you that what you are thinking is a flat out bad idea and are trying to steer you a different way. Do not be so arrogant and hard-headed, and do not fail to listen to the sound advice of those who love you best in this world.

In what areas might it be wise for you to seek the counsel and advice of others today?

We come then to our final principle from these verses:

What is providence?

6. Trust in God's providence to direct your steps (vv. 1, 3).

Verse 1 says, "There was a relative of Naomi's husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech. His name was Boaz."

Boaz we are told is a man of great wealth. Now this phrase has a very broad range of meaning. It could be translated that he was a wealthy man as we have in the New King James. It could be translated that he was a man of integrity. It could be translated that he was a strong man, that he was a powerful man. The phrase is used in a whole variety of contexts. Suffice it to say that Boaz, whose name means "in him is strength" was a man of moral, financial and social standing. He was a man of integrity. He was a man of influence. He was a man of means.

But Naomi doesn't seem to have any recollection of him until she is reminded of his name after Ruth returns. At the very least she doesn't have any designs on or hope of obtaining help from him. It's not as if she says, "Now Ruth, go out and see if you can find the fields of Boaz. If you can do that, it'll be a home run." No in verse 3, it tells us plainly that Ruth just "happened to come" into the field of Boaz. In fact the Hebrew reads literally, "Her chance chanced to bring her to the part of the field of Boaz." But this is a playful and amusing turn of phrase, because the Hebrew mind knows nothing of chance and the author of Ruth belies this idea in a dozen ways throughout this little book

How was God providentially working in Ruth, Naomi and Boaz's lives.

"The lot is cast, but the answer is from the Lord." Absolutely nothing in this book has happened by chance yet. Nor are the events that occur attributed to chance after this point in this book. So the only way to understand verse 3 is that it is a statement of pure irony. The author, most likely the prophet Samuel, gives us a foreshadowing of joy in verse one, and then speaks to us in a very tongue and cheek fashion in verse three, like he is simply making fun of the whole idea of chance here and wants us to join him in the joke.

Divine providence, the same Divine providence that brought the famine, the same divine providence that ended Elimelech's life and the lives of Mahlon and Chilion, the same Divine providence that made Naomi's life so bitter to her, the same Divine providence that ended the famine, the same Divine providence that preserved Boaz alive and provided the possibility of a kinsman-redeemer, this providence looks down upon Ruth's faith, looks at her efforts, looks at the respectful honoring of her

How has God been providentially working in your life?

aging mother-in-law, looks at the amazing love of her heart expressed in chapter 1, looks upon her willingness to humble herself, looks on her heart to learn wisdom and take the godly advice of others, looks upon all of these things, and then guides her feet unerringly and completely unknowingly to Ruth to exactly the right place at exactly the right time. And the same Divine providence that made Boaz an upstanding man of honor and gave him wealth, woke Boaz up that very same morning and guided his steps to exactly the right place at exactly the right moment and then turned his head in exactly the right direction and gave him eyes to see Ruth and the curiosity to ask the question of his servant in verse five.

It was all a wonderful work of God's providence to bring His favor to bear on Ruth, Boaz, Naomi and the rest of the world as well.

In light of God's providence, should we respond to things that seem to "just happen"? With fear or faith?

So in summary: How do we seek God's favor?

- 1. Put your faith in the word of God (v. 2).**
- 2. Exercise honest efforts (v.2).**
- 3. Give respect to whom respect is due (v. 2).**
- 4. Move out in humility rather than pride (v. 2).** (You can't lay in your bed all day)
- 5. Listen to the sensible advice of those who care for you most (v. 2).**
- 6. Trust in God's providence to direct your steps (vv. 1, 3).**

Hymn: He Leadeth Me

He leadeth me, O blessed thought!
O words with heav'nly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

Refrain:

He leadeth me, He leadeth me,
By His own hand He leadeth me;
His faithful foll'wer I would be,
For by His hand He leadeth me.

Sometimes 'mid scenes of deepest gloom,
Sometimes where Eden's bowers bloom,
By waters still, o'er troubled sea,
Still 'tis His hand that leadeth me.

Lord, I would place my hand in Thine,
Nor ever murmur nor repine;
Content, whatever lot I see,
Since 'tis my God that leadeth me.

And when my task on earth is done,
When by Thy grace the vict'ry's won,
E'en death's cold wave I will not flee,
Since God through Jordan leadeth me.

Words: Joseph Gilmore, 1862
Music: William B. Bradbury, 1864