

## Looking for a favor, finding grace

Portions adapted from, Luck, Favor, And God's Providence Series, by Ken Ritz @ SermonCentral.com

Would you consider yourself a lucky person? I'm not very lucky. I never win in games of chance. When Betty and I have a couple of raffle tickets, or door prize numbers, if we win anything, its most always her ticket. Some of you would say, Yeah, that's how I am, if it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all.

You know what's interesting? There are about 800,000 words in the Bible and over 12,000 different words, but the words "luck" or "lucky" are never used a single time. Apparently God doesn't believe in luck. It's as if God plans everything out in advance and has a purpose for it all; so luck doesn't really exist.

Instead of **luck**, the Bible talks about **grace** and **favor**. Instead of blind chance, Scripture describes a personal God who wants to show grace to all, yet He also shows favor to certain people. Now those people who receive God's favor may look to outsiders like they're really lucky, that things just always work out in the end for them, but it's God's favor, not luck.

So the question is, how does God's favor work?

To answer this question, we need to know the distinction between God's grace and God's favor ... they are not the same thing. Our Bible teaches that while God's **Grace**, which is His **undeserved mercy**, is sufficient for the salvation of all people, He apparently doesn't show favor to everyone.

But does he show favor to all Christians? And if so, does He show favor equally to all Christians, or are there some who get more favor and some who get less? And if that's the case, is there anything I can do, that will cause me to receive more favor from God? These are profound questions. For our sake, we all really should know the difference between **luck**, **grace**, and **favor**. This week we're going to see what appears to be a change of luck for Naomi and Ruth; going from really bad, to really good. But as I said, this thing called **luck** doesn't even exist! So that answers the question about luck, all we need to do figure out how, like Ruth, we can receive both God's **grace** and His **favor**.

But first let's do a quick review of the story of Ruth up to this point. While the events and people, such as Ruth and Boaz are real and show up in the lineage of Jesus, their story is also intended to be a parable with an obvious lesson to teach us about running away from or running towards God. Last week was all about running away.

In the days of the Judges, there was a famine in the Promised Land indicating that the Israelites have again wandered away from their faith in God. But, instead of repenting and trusting God to provide His daily bread, a man named Elimelech moves his family out of Bethlehem; the town's name literally means "House of Bread." Leaving the Promised Land completely, he takes up residence in the land of Moab; a pagan nation with whom the Israelites had been forbidden to have any association.

Ten tragic years later, Elimelech has died and both of his sons who took Moabite wives, have also died leaving behind three widows in a desperate condition. So, Elimelech's widow Naomi decides to go back home to Bethlehem where she has a better chance of survival. Naomi is

able to convince one of her daughters-in-law to return to her own people and find a new husband. But her second daughter-in-law, Ruth, refuses to leave her and makes a vow to God to stay by her side until death parts them.

Having arrived back in Bethlehem, Naomi has a house and some land, but otherwise the two women are completely destitute having neither money, nor food, nor any other means of producing an income. Naomi bitterly gives vent to their dire circumstances, blaming God for the tragic life she has had.

Now, the only way for the two of them to get enough food to live on, Ruth must go into farmer's fields to "**glean**" – that is to gather fallen grains of wheat and fallen fruit behind the harvesters – which is allowed by Israel's law for widows, orphans, and even foreigners (Lev. 19:9-11).

This was the Israelite form of welfare; if you were old or sick you were completely dependent on the generosity of your neighbors, but if you were healthy you should be able to go out and gather sufficient food to stay alive.

God further added a blessing for those farmers who honored this gleaning law.

[leave the gleanings] for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. Deuteronomy 24:19-22

While we now have all kinds government welfare programs supposedly caring for poor and needy, they are never enough and never serve everyone. So there remains a blessing from God that's still promised to us. When we personally help to care for the poor; the widows, the orphans, and foreigners, we will be blessed – we will receive more of **God's favor**.

Thus Ruth heads out early in the morning to glean food for the two of them. However, regardless of the law, since she is a despised Moabite, Ruth runs a great risk of refusal or worse, still abuse by the local workers in the fields. Thus, arriving at a field she humbly asks for permission to glean which is reluctantly granted by the farm's foreman.

But it just so happened that the first field in which she chose to glean belonged to a very godly man named **Boaz** who was not only wealthy he was also a near relative to Elimelech and he just so happened to come out to his field at lunchtime and was now watching her hard at work (luck? Not hardly!).

Asking who she might be, the foreman tells Boaz that this is *the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the land of Moab*. Yet the foreman is impressed by her, adding that *she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.*'

Calling her over, Boaz does not address her as a foreigner – which is what she would expect – but instead he calls her "**my daughter** (2:8)," saying that he had already heard of her faithfulness in caring for Naomi. Then raising his voice for all his workers to hear, Boaz prays that God will bless her, identifying Ruth no longer as a foreigner, no longer as a despised Moabite, but as a daughter of Israel.

*May the Lord reward you for your deeds. May you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!* (Ruth 2:12)

He then urges her to stay only in his fields where he can guarantee her safety. He also offers her food and water and instructs his workers to intentionally leave behind extra grain for her to gather.

So let's take another look at this idea of grace versus favor. What Boaz has seen in Ruth, God has known all along. And as we are learning from the story of Ruth, God is always involved in every detail of our lives, having a good purpose behind both the good and bad events, even though we don't always see it at the time.

It was not luck which brought Ruth to Boaz's fields, but God's favor; His quiet guiding hand, working to bring salvation and redemption to both of these widows in accordance with the vow that Ruth had made to Him.

You see when Ruth made her vow to Naomi, she was also declaring her faith in the God of Israel, thus receiving **God's saving grace** which has always been available even back then to all who call upon the name of the Lord (Romans 10:13). As Boaz said, she had found refuge under God's wings, but her acts of loyalty to Naomi also brought her into **God's favor** and thus His guiding to get her into Boaz's field.

Coming back home from that first day of gleaning with a surprising load of around 35 pounds of barley – enough for a two weeks of bread for the both of them – as Ruth tells her mother-in-law of the kindly land owner who showed her such favor. Hearing Boaz's name, Naomi begins to sense the hand of God in their apparent turn of luck and her bitterness begins to fade with this new glimmer of hope. Naomi, then asks a blessing from God upon Boaz for the generosity he showed to both Ruth and herself.

Naomi also recognizes that Boaz, as a near relative, might possibly consider claiming the responsibility of being their "**kinsman redeemer**" (*a very important concept which we will explore next week*). So she encourages Ruth to do just as Boaz told her, staying only in his fields. For the next four months through both the barley and wheat harvests, thus Ruth is able to gather plenty of food for herself and for Naomi.

Now, did Ruth understand God's providence, His favor and what He was doing at the time? Probably not. Do you and I understand it in our own lives; usually not, though we can often look back in our life and see it in hindsight.

In telling the story of her own life moving through tragedy to triumph, Corrie ten Boom included in her book, *The Hiding Place*, a poem illustrating this relationship that God has with all the events of our lives.

**"The Weaver"** by Grant Colfax Tullar

My life is but a weaving  
Between my God and me.  
I cannot choose the colors  
He weaveth steadily.

Of't times He weaveth sorrow;  
And I in foolish pride  
Forget He sees the upper  
And I the underside.

Not 'til the loom is silent  
And the shuttles cease to fly  
Will God unroll the canvas  
And reveal the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful  
In the weaver's skillful hand  
As the threads of gold and silver  
In the pattern He has planned

He knows, He loves, He cares;  
Nothing this truth can dim.  
He gives the very best to those  
Who leave the choice to Him.

I've love this illustration of a tapestry. When problems in your life are coming one after another and it's hard to find any meaning or make sense of it all; or like Naomi you start to wonder if God even cares. At times like that it helps to see God's work in your life as a tapestry. The top side of a tapestry always displays a definite pattern, but the back side looks like a jumble of threads and yarn that have been pulled through and tied off. You can't even recognize the pattern from the back, but when we get to heaven and look down, we'll see the tapestry that God was building of our lives and it'll be beautiful.

Now knowing that God is at work in your life, you should ask, how can I receive more of God's favor? How can I get God to shape the circumstances of my life to work out for good and bring blessings into my life, just like He did for Ruth?

Simple. First you need to accept **God's grace** which He has always wanted to extend to you. Until you do that you are actually living like Elimelech, as God's enemy; running away from God not towards Him.

But if like Ruth, you have sought refuge under God's wing, you have received His grace. So now, also like Ruth, you can begin seeking **God's favor on your life** by following Him wholeheartedly. By going all in, not sitting on the spiritual fence but seeking to grow as you serve God by serving others in His name, then you'll also get His favor.

Because while God's saving grace is available for all who call upon Him, His rewards, His favor, definitely depends on what we do now as a member of His family.

"I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward everyone according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve." Jeremiah 17:10 NIV

God looks at what's in our heart and what's on our mind, along with our conduct, and rewards us according to what our deeds deserve.

Again, we can't earn salvation, that's based on grace, but we can earn rewards or favor from God when we follow Him wholeheartedly. And in the same way, we can receive discipline from God if we're not following Him wholeheartedly.

Some of you may be thinking, but don't we get our rewards in heaven?

Yes, absolutely, we get rewards or loss of reward in heaven ( 2 Cor. 5:10), but not only in heaven. The Bible is full of examples of people who received reward here on earth as God blessed them for their faithfulness. And those blessings come in many ways, one of which is simply increased happiness.

In 2016, the Yale School of Management surveyed over 6,000 people, asking questions about their overall sense of well-being and also about their religious activity. They found that people at the top of the religiously active scale reported much higher levels of well-being than the least religiously active people. In other words, the people most committed to their faith were significantly happier than the rest.

That was no surprise, studies have found that before. But here's the surprise: they found that people with moderate or low religious activity actually reported lower levels of well-being than atheists and agnostics."

So one of the study's conclusions was, if you want happiness in life either be fully committed to God or be an atheist, but you don't want to be halfway committed because that's where the unhappy people live. Isn't it interesting that Jesus basically said the same to the church; that He would rather you be either hot or cold, because being lukewarm makes Him sick to His stomach (Re. 3:15-16).

Another way of looking at these findings might be that the fully committed followers of Christ are happier, because they're receiving more of God's favor and the halfway committed people are less happy, because they're receiving more of God's discipline.

One final point. Did you notice, as very different from the first half, that there is a lot of praying going on in this second half of the story; people looking to extend God's blessing, God's favor, on others? Ruth's initial vow/prayer of faithfulness to God and Naomi is followed by Boaz's prayer for a blessing on Ruth and then Naomi's prayer for a blessing on Boaz. By the end of the book every prayer has been answered by God. Sometimes, when we pray God uses us to answer our own prayer. Boaz doesn't know it but God is going to use him to be the blessing which he has just asked for Ruth; that is where this story will take us next week.

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What then should we learn from today's tale?

Why do you think Boaz was so generous with Ruth? All the law required was that he allow her access to his land, but Boaz blesses her, feeds her and intentionally makes sure that she can

gather more than enough food. He will eventually marry Ruth and also take on the responsibility of caring for Naomi while providing an heir to keep the family name going.

Was it because he was Naomi's relative? No, because an even closer relative when asked will refuse to take on that responsibility.

Was it because he himself was the son of a foreign woman, Rahab the Harlot, and he knew how hard it was for foreigners living in Israel? Possibly.

But I think it was because Boaz was a godly man, who understood the Gospel, the good news about the coming Messiah.

Now you might ask, isn't the gospel just in the New Testament?"

Actually not. The New Testament says that the gospel was preached to Abraham.

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.' Galatians 3:8

The gospel, the good news about our salvation that comes through Jesus Christ is found throughout the Old Testament as well.

And we can see a clear illustration of it in the book of Ruth. You and I, before we come to Christ, are either like Elimelech, intentionally running from God, or like Ruth, finding our way home to God.

We were pagans, rebels, we are sinners, we come from the wrong background; we come to the Lord empty-handed and needy.

Then Boaz – whose name means "strength" – is a picture of Jesus, the ultimate mighty man of strength. Just as Boaz went to survey his fields, so the Lord Jesus came to earth to survey his field here. Just as Boaz saw Ruth so Jesus sees us.

Just as Boaz went beyond the requirements of the law, all the way to grace, so the Lord Jesus has gone beyond the requirements of the law, all the way to grace, with you and me.

And just as Boaz was unbelievably generous to Ruth, so Jesus is unbelievably generous to us, giving us both grace and favor: new life, eternal life, with abundant blessings, none of which we deserve.

To use the words of Ruth, we have found favor in the eyes of our Lord Jesus. That's the gospel right there in Ruth.

Why does Boaz go beyond the law to grace?

Why does he give so much more than he needs to?

Boaz understands that everything he has belongs to God. Because he has received everything as a gift, he is generous with it, he's a gift-giver. He's a man of grace, of favor.

You and I should look at Jesus, just like Ruth looked at Boaz and say, "Why have you been so kind to me?" Why have you shown me favor? And Jesus would reply, "*it's grace. It's love. It's mercy. I don't owe you anything, but I love you; it's just who I am.*"

Now, because Jesus did that for us, you and I have the great opportunity to be like Boaz, and to be like Jesus by showing grace and generosity to others. We can give money, or food, or time, or serve people, or visit them in their homes or the hospital.

We can be unbelievably generous, just like Boaz, because we understand that just like the field of Boaz, everything we own actually belongs to God. We've received His grace and favor so that we can then give it away.

Let's pray about this, thanking God for the grace and favor that He showers on us.

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Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your loving Providence, for Your goodness and care for us that guides even the little details of our lives into Your good purpose. We ask You Lord for Your favor toward us, we ask that You will speak to us, bless us, give us Your mercy, and in all this draw us into a closer relationship and friendship with You.

Father we ask that You help us learn the joy in becoming people who lavish Your grace and kindness to others all around us, not because we have to, but because we get to.

Whether we are poor like Ruth and only have a little bit to share, or rich like Boaz with much to give, I pray God, that our hands would be guided by Your hands, that You would give us opportunities to bless others. I pray that we would be a church that would share in the great joy of doing the work of the gospel, following the example of Boaz, in both proclaiming and living out the love of Jesus in our world. Amen.