

# Responding to Favorable Providence

By Don Green

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**Truth Community Church**  
4183 Mt. Carmel Tobasco Road  
Cincinnati, OH 45255

**Website:** [truthcommunitychurch.org](http://truthcommunitychurch.org)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm](http://www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm)

What we have here in Ruth 3 is the evidence that something special is going on in the unfolding of this story, that providence is coming forward and it's being put on display. It's like the veil is being pulled back and the hidden hand of God is now visible in what is being seen and we see that in Ruth 3. What I want to do tonight is just kind of walk through the narrative and just walk through at the end a couple of basic but very profound aspects of how it is that you respond to providence in your own life and how it is that when we embrace the fact that God is continually at work in everything that happens, how is it that we respond when providence starts to put itself on display and significant things are happening and you're conscious of that when it occurs. Ruth 3 will give us some direction on that as we walk through it.

We've seen a wonderful story in the first two chapters as we left off last month. We've seen a wonderful story in Ruth. We've seen Ruth be faithful to her mother-in-law even though it seemed like there was no earthly way that that would prove to be to her advantage. It seemed like when she followed Ruth back to Bethlehem, that there was nothing in her future for her, and yet she was converted. We saw that.

Look at Ruth 1, she was converted truly to the living God. She was born again, if we put it in New Testament terms. In Ruth 1:15-16, Ruth, this Moabite widow says to her mother-in-law after their husbands had died, she says in verse 16, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me." And you see the tender character of Ruth on display. You see the sterling integrity of Ruth on display. You see her conversion on display when she says, "I will abandon my gods and embrace your God as my God." This was the time of her conversion and somehow seeing the godly life of Naomi and Naomi in those 10 years in Moab, no doubt speaking to her about faith and the things of God and all of that, Ruth is drawn to a saving faith and would one day become an ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ. Really an incredible working of providence in that.

But you see this simplicity, and what I mean is the sterling purity of Ruth's character and she follows Naomi back to Bethlehem and they start to eke out an existence and it's pretty rough on them there for a while. You know, Ruth is out gleaning in the fields and

following after workers and just picking up grain to try to eke out a hand to mouth existence, and there for a time, you know, somebody looking from the outside might have wondered and questioned Ruth, "Was it really worth it for you to come and follow after this God that you now own as your own? It doesn't seem like it's working out too spectacularly for you as you're grinding your fingers into the bone, trying to eke out this existence." And yet God was at work and there was more going on behind the scenes than what anyone could have recognized in those early days of the outworking of his providence.

And you know the story, we've looked at it. She found her way, so happened to find her way to the field of Boaz who was a relative of Naomi's. Boaz treated her kindly and now there's a little bit of energy going forward and you can see the providence playing out and on an earthly level, you get a picture in that second chapter that there may be some sparks of romance going on as well. And as you come to the end of chapter 2, this is all just by way of review, in chapter 2, verse 20, for example, Naomi explains to Ruth who Boaz is. It would be like, you say, "Well, I just happened to meet a man today and his name was Bill Gates," and you don't know who Bill Gates is. And she says, "Bill Gates! Let me tell you who you just met." That's what's going on in verse 20. Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed of the Lord who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead." She said, "God's kindness is on display with a man that you just met." She goes on to say in verse 20, "This man is our relative. He is one of our closest relatives. He is one of our redeemers. He is in a position to be under obligation under the law of God to help us," she explains. And Ruth says to her in verse 21, "He said to me, 'Stay close to my servants until they have finished all my harvest.' Naomi said to Ruth, 'It is good that you go out with his maids.'" And in verse 23, "She stayed close by the maids of Boaz in order to glean until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. And she lived with her mother-in-law."

Now, while this is unfolding, Naomi has expressed in the past in chapter 1, verse 9, she expressed concern about Ruth's future. She wanted Ruth to have a husband. At the time when she prayed, she assumed that Ruth would go back and find a Moabite husband; Ruth kind of distorted those plans when she followed after her. But Naomi has had this sort of paternal care for her daughter-in-law; this concern that her daughter-in-law would be provided for and so when Boaz comes into the picture, she's excited about that and yet she feels the need to kind of stir the pot to help providence along, you might say. And as Ruth 2 closes, this is Ruth now in the fields and she's living with Naomi and life is kind of progressing day by day and yet there's this tension, there is this element that's been injected into the story line that shows that there's more to come. Here in chapter 3, we come to the turning point of the story and what has been latent in the relationship between Boaz and Ruth now becomes explicit. What we see in the early stirrings of providence now comes into full display.

What Naomi did as a woman of faith, Naomi saw a favorable providence in what had happened. Boaz was eligible. Boaz was a kinsman redeemer. Ruth was available and needed a husband and Boaz had shown favor to Ruth. It doesn't take too much of a woman's intuition to put two and two together and say there may be something more to

be done here. And so she, as it were, speaking figuratively not literally, what we see in the early part of Ruth 3, is she kind of puts her hand in the small of Ruth's back and pushes her out the door toward Boaz and we see the unfolding of this as she seeks to advance that relationship to fulfill her concern that Ruth would have a husband to care for her after Naomi herself was gone.

So look at verses 1 and 2 here. "Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? Now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight.'" Naomi is expressing, once again, the fact that she feels personally responsible for Ruth's well-being. She had expressed this in the past. Look at chapter 1, verse 9, you can see the heart of Naomi on display overtime. She says in verse 9 to Ruth and to her other daughter-in-law at the time, she says, "'May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.'" So this idea of rest or security in marriage was on Naomi's mind. She uses a similar word in chapter 3, verse 1, when she says, "shall I not seek security for you?" You know, Naomi was the Jew, she was the native in this land. Her daughter-in-law was the foreigner and so Naomi says, "I've got to help you here. Is it not right for me to seek security for you?" And for a widow in that society, security would come in the form of marriage, not through finding an independent existence. Marriage would be the source of security for her. And Naomi, having grown up in Bethlehem, being familiar with the traditions and the routine of harvest time, she knew what was going to happen because it was the end of the barley and wheat harvest. So in verse 2, she says, "Behold, Boaz is going to be winnowing barley at the first sing floor tonight."

So she concocts this plan and she tells Ruth, "Make yourself attractive and go to him tonight." Look at verses 3 and 4, she says, "Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes, and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. It shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you shall do." What on earth is Naomi doing here? She's telling Ruth, "Ruth, get yourself dolled up here, go and kind of watch in the shadows and see what Boaz is doing and where he goes to lie down, and then I want you to go in later and make yourself at his feet, uncover his feet, and then see what happens after that."

Now, to us, there's a lot of things and I emphasize "to us" here in our 21st century mindset. There is quite a bit in that little scenario that sounds a little bit suspicious. You know, if you think about it and think through what she's saying, first of all, she's telling her daughter-in-law to make herself especially attractive. She tells her to watch in secret to see where Boaz goes and where he lies down. And then she says, "Uncover his feet and then see what happens in the cover of night." So she's telling Ruth to go and to make this very forward advance on Boaz and then see what happens.

What are we to make of this? Some people say that, well, this was a common custom at that time and that this was a way that Naomi was just following the custom of the time. Other people are less certain and suggest that maybe Naomi was really not even being

godly in what she was suggesting here because this seems so very forward for a woman to do, and what are we to make of it? People are, you know, commentators you read, they have different takes on it. Well, first of all, when it comes to saying this particular aspect of going there and uncovering his feet was a custom, that's an easy explanation but one of the best commentators on Ruth, Leon Morris, says this and I quote, he's skeptical that that's the answer to this; he says, "We have very little knowledge of the customs prevalent in Israel in antiquity, and the arrangements for marriage here outlined are not elsewhere attested. But then we have no other example of a situation quite like this. What was to be done where two widows were left to their own devices?" What he's saying is, he says, "You know, I'm not convinced that this is an established custom in ancient Israel that she's following here." He says, "First of all, no place else talks about this so-called custom and so it's kind of on shaky ground to say that it's something established that everyone would know about." And also he's saying, he's saying, "Consider the situation here. You have a widow in Naomi, and her daughter-in-law who is also a widow. How often does that happen where a mother-in-law is responsible for the care of a widowed daughter-in-law?" He's saying, "You know, there aren't customs to cover this because this is a pretty extraordinary situation that we're dealing with." So what are we to make of it? One other writer suggests that and I'm not going to quote him here but suggest that Naomi had stepped over the line here. This is far too forward for her to be acting and questions her integrity, and that maybe Boaz, you know, she is just trying to force things too much and to send an unmarried widow into the grain field like that, to the threshing floor, is too much and she shouldn't have done that.

You know, I'm not convinced that that's the right explanation either and I would say this, and how are we to understand this in what Ruth has done, let's start here: I think the safest route for us to assess what Naomi did here is to assume the best and to assume that Naomi and Ruth and Boaz are all acting righteously within the context of their culture some 3,000 years ago or more, about 3,000 years ago. Let's just assume that what sounds to us in the 21st century as something very flirtatious and something very forward and prone to unrighteousness even, that perhaps 3,000 years ago they were seeing it differently and that they did not see impropriety in it; that somehow there was something proper about this. After all, Boaz is a godly man and Boaz did not turn Ruth away when she showed up at his feet, rather he commends her for her virtue. So I always think that the safest route unless Scripture gives us clear indications to the contrary, is that we should assume that biblical characters who are not criticized directly in the text, we should assume that the men of faith in the Bible, the men and women of faith in the Bible, are acting righteously until we have reason in the text to say that they're not. Let's not sit in judgment of those that God has seen fit to honor with how their lives turned out.

So, we're going to understand this text going forward now, that Ruth righteously made her interest in Boaz known to him in this circumstance even if in our culture a nighttime encounter under the cover of darkness might seem immodest. We're just going to assume that there's something about this that is different in their context than would be in ours and we'll go on the assumption that these three that God chose to honor and make them ancestors of Christ, Naomi not in a blood sense, that somehow they were acting righteously, and if it was scandalous, Boaz, a man of character, would not have received

it well. So we rely on the way that Boaz interpreted it to guide our understanding of how we should understand it.

Well, whatever the case, Ruth follows her mother-in-law's advice. Look at verse 5 with me, "She said to her," meaning Ruth said to Naomi, "'All that you say I will do.' So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her." You have to love the submissive deferential spirit that Ruth shows to her mother-in-law here, I believe, that Naomi gives her a plan and sends Ruth out with this plan, but Ruth is really in a vulnerable position: she's going out at night; there's no guarantee about how Boaz is going to respond. It's possible that it could be misinterpreted, and yet Ruth says to Naomi, "I'll do what you say." Her trust and her, really to use the word "obedience" to her mother-in-law is exemplary. Her character is such that she is willing to follow the leadership of one who is in authority over her and she follows and she goes down, and verse 6 is a bit of a summary statement saying that Ruth did what Naomi asked and then beginning in verse 7, you see the details of how it played out in what follows, and it gives us the details of what happens.

So now here in verse 7, you kind of see it from Ruth's perspective and you see what's going on as this plays out; this seemingly odd advice that Naomi gave her, we see how it plays out in real time. And what we see, living on the cutting edge of providence, you see providence playing out in detail and you realize that something significant is going on even while you're not sure exactly how it's going to turn out. I love those times. Like I say, I think they are comparatively rare. When really, really major things are happening in really, really obvious ways and you know that God's hand is in it, that's not the norm in the sense that it's the daily nature of life necessarily, but when it happens, it's very special and this is what Ruth was living out as she entered into Boaz's world there in verse 7.

Look at it with me, please. Boaz is in a good mood. Verse 7, "When Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came secretly, and uncovered his feet and lay down." Now, while Boaz here has drunk and his heart was merry, we should not think of him as intoxicated here. He is merry for a couple of reasons, 1. he's just had a good meal and so he has that feeling of satisfaction from having eaten after a long day's work; and also, remember the overall context, he's now sitting on top of a good harvest when just in the very recent past there had been a famine in the land, and that's how the whole book opened. The book opens in famine but now here Boaz is as a landowner, he's got a harvest, he's eaten a good meal, he feels really good because the work is done and now he's able to enjoy the fruit of his labor going forward, so of course his heart is happy. Your heart is happy after a good payday and you've had a good meal. Well, we should think about it in those terms and this is what he's doing and so he goes in and he lies down at the end of the heap of the grain.

Now, what they tell us is that the landowners and those who were responsible for the harvest, they would lay next to their grain in order to protect it from thieves at night so they would sleep on the, so to speak, barn floor next to the harvest until it could be processed and taken away so that no one would steal it. So he's laying down protecting

the fruit of months of labor through the sowing and the harvest that followed, and so he's happy and he lays down and he goes to sleep thinking that he is alone. And then Ruth kind of paces up and quietly lays down. He's obviously asleep by the time that she gets there because she uncovers his feet. If he had been awake, he would have noticed this, but he was not awake. So Ruth goes and uncovers his feet. There are some who suggest that "feet" is a euphemism, a figure of speech that she uncovered more than just his feet but I don't think that's justified and that's all we'll say about it. We'll take it as the English text naturally reads and not think that she uncovered more and was indecent in what she did. I think that's unthinkable in the context of this pure book in Scripture. So she goes and she lays down at his feet and pulls off whatever his cloak or whatever was covering, and uncovers his feet, and now she waits.

Verse 8, she's laying there, it's probably unlikely that Ruth herself went to sleep. She needed to be awake for when the inevitable happened and so she's just laying there waiting patiently at Boaz's feet for things to happen, and look what takes place in verse 8, "It happened in the middle of the night that the man was startled and bent forward; and behold, a woman was lying at his feet." Now, let's just say something about this right now: you know, when you live in the city like we do here or in the suburbs, nighttime is not completely dark. You know, we're used to, those of us that live in the suburbs, maybe some of you out in the country, you have greater realms of darkness, but in this time of world history, darkness would have been really, really dark and there are times when the darkness is so thick that you can barely see your hand in front of your face.

Well, we should assume that kind of darkness here because Boaz, when he sits up, he doesn't know who is just three feet down at his feet. He obviously cannot see her. He cannot recognize her. He just knows that someone is there and he says, "Who are you?" And he recognizes the voice that responds because he has spoken to her in the past. "She answered, 'I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative.'"

Now, first of all, Ruth identifies herself and yet in what she says, it may seem a little bit obscure in the first reading in English, what she's saying for she is asking him to marry her; she is being that direct and you can tell by the way that Boaz responds to it. First of all, "to spread your covering over your your maid," she's asking more than to be warm in the night because she's cold and she needs a blanket over her. That's not what she's saying. She's saying, "Spread your covering." In other words, spread your protection over me. And she gives the reason, "for you are a close relative," and what she's saying is, "You're a kinsman redeemer. You have a biblical responsibility here," a biblical opportunity that we've talked about in prior messages on Ruth 2. She's saying, "Boaz, I would like you to marry me," by what she says to him. He is a kinsman redeemer. He is closely related enough to act and to help and to even marry her.

What we saw in times past was that the kinsman redeemer in passages from Leviticus and Deuteronomy, you can go back to the prior messages, was someone who could rescue a relative from trouble when the relative could not save himself whether that involved purchasing land that he had sold under duress, redeeming him from slavery or even

marriage if he was related and his brother's wife was left a widow. The kinsman redeemer defended the rights of the person, the rights of a family member, and helped him in time of trouble. And so what Ruth is saying when she says, "you're a close relative, you are a redeemer," what she's saying is it's a very vulnerable moment. It's a very sweet moment where she is appealing to him based on their relationship, based on his position in the family and she's saying, "Spread your covering over me. Protect me. Help me."

Now, why would she do it at night? Well, you know, when else is she going to have a private conversation with him with all of the other workers around where people are going to do it? They needed to have this talk in private and so Ruth is asking him for his protection and you can tell that Boaz understood her request in this way by how he acts in response and by what he does in response. Marriage is implied and Boaz gets that and look at what he says as we continue on in the text, verses 10 and following, "Then he said," and this is a crucial moment and he no doubt said this almost instantly but there is that moment in time where lots is pivoting on what is about to happen immediately next and you just don't know quite what's going to happen.

It reminds me of when Nancy and I, our relationship transitioned from friendship to a romantic relationship, that little pivot point, and I know Nancy remembers this. If you want the details, ask Nancy. Plan for an hour-long explanation while I go and do something else, but I'll just give you the short version here. We had spent some time together. There was obvious interest there but I had, there was another girl that I had a distant relationship with, and Nancy had plans to go to Hong Kong. She was going to move and relocate to Hong Kong to be a missionary, and those were the plans that we had brought into the relationship as we were in this moment. And Nancy asked me, she said, "Well, I want to know about that other girl before this goes any further." I said, "That other girl, she's not a problem. It's not a problem." And so there's this tension, you know, because we realized that we're talking seriously here and I said, "I want to know what about Hong Kong?" She said, "Hong Kong's not a problem." And from that moment forward, we knew that the path was clear for us to be together and to pursue this relationship. I would get rid of the other girl, I don't want to say anything bad about her, she was a nice girl and is happily married herself now. I would take care of that. Nancy would get rid of the plans for Hong Kong and we were free to move forward in our relationship.

Well, in like manner here, there is this pivot point between verses 9 and 10 where Ruth has said, "Spread your covering over me," and she takes a breath and waits for Boaz to respond. What's going to happen next? The tension of this, the interest of it is intense. And look at how Boaz responds and remember the position of vulnerability from which Ruth has spoken and you can see the grace that just flows off of Boaz's tongue. "He said, 'May you be blessed of the LORD, my daughter.'" He pronounces blessing on her. "God bless you, Ruth. You have shown your last kindness to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich." He understands that she's asking about marriage and he immediately commends her. He says, because he's an older man, he's older than her and much older apparently, and he says, "You know, I understand you could have gone to someone else. You could have gone to a younger man. You could

have gone to a rich man. You could have pursued marriage according to normal human desire by normal criteria of human romance and you would have been successful." He commends her. He says, "You're a woman of excellence. You could have had the pick of a lot of other men and yet you came to me. God bless you. The Lord bless you. This is a better kindness than you even showed to Naomi when you accompanied her from your homeland into our country. You are just multiplying the outworking of a godly character, Ruth."

And he says to her in verse 11, "Now, my daughter, do not fear." He puts her at ease. He quiets any lingering sense of uncertainty she might have had. He says, "Now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you ask, for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence." He says, "Now it is true I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I. Remain this night, and when morning comes, if he will redeem you, good; let him redeem you. But if he does not wish to redeem you, then I will redeem you," and he says it with an oath, "as the LORD lives. Lie down until morning." Sweet, sweet moment in redemptive history. Remember, without getting too far ahead of the story, remember that their union produced the line that led to David that led to the human birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, and what we're seeing is, we're seeing a foundational moment in redemptive history as the line of our Lord Jesus Christ, his human ancestry is advanced, and it's all wrapped up in this sweet moment in the dark of night as one godly man is speaking to a godly woman and God is playing out his purposes and putting them on display. Boaz is more than ready to reciprocate interest just as Nancy was ready to reciprocate my interest in that fateful moment in Highland Park, Illinois.

But there's a complicating factor here for Boaz and Ruth. There is a closer relative which means that this closer relative, who isn't really identified, has a right of first refusal. The right to Ruth has to go through him first and Boaz recognizes that and he says, "I can't settle this here tonight. There is another man who has a prior claim on you under the customs of the way that this works and therefore we have to speak with him first." But he says, "Don't worry. As surely as the Lord lives, I will act on this and I will redeem you if he doesn't." And so he tells her, "Either way, you're going to be cared for and I will make sure that you are cared for whether it's me that does it personally or this closer relative does." So Boaz tells her to lie back down. The nighttime proposal has concluded and Ruth can put her head down knowing that she has been received favorably by this man of God.

Now, there was simply a matter that it had to work itself out; providence had to play itself out in time, and in verse 14, we see what transpires. "So she lay at his feet until morning and rose before one could recognize another." It was still dark when she got up and no doubt she's stepping softly and stepping out into the night, getting ready to leave and Boaz said, perhaps to himself, "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." What had transpired was righteous. What had transpired was without blame, but you know how it is. You know how gossips can get a hold of a story and twist it and make something pure look bad because they enjoy the sin of it all. So Boaz here,



even now, is protecting Ruth and protecting her reputation saying, "Let it not be known. You need to leave before anyone sees this and the whole situation gets misinterpreted."

So he says to her in verse 15, he's sending her back with a tremendous amount of food. He says in verse 15, "'Give me the cloak that is on you and hold it.' So she held it, and he measured six measures of barley and laid it on her. Then she went into the city." It's not clear exactly how much weight of grain this is that he gave to her. The best estimates range somewhere between 60 and 90 pounds of grain that he gives to her. A lot of the commentators think that he helped position it on her head because that's the way they would carry things, and that he positioned a huge weight of grain so that she could carry it forward back to Naomi. But he sends her back with abundant provision and perhaps recognizing that Naomi had put her up to this, perhaps this is a not-so-subtle thank you from Boaz to Naomi saying, "Thank you for sending Ruth to me," because he's sending it and Ruth goes back to Naomi. She went into the city.

Verse 16, "When she came to her mother-in-law, she said," Naomi said, "'How did it go, my daughter?'" Now, you can relate to this, right? I mean, 3,000 years doesn't change some things too much. You know, she had played the part of the matchmaker. Ruth is coming back and she wants to know, "So how did it go? I've been up all night wondering what was happening here." And there's this mixture of eagerness and anticipation and just wanting to know the result. And Ruth tells "her all that the man had done for her," verse 16.

In verse 17, "She said," and these are the last words you read Ruth speaking in the entire book, she said, "These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said, 'Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'" Naomi is pleased. Naomi can sit back and rest now.

Verse 18, "she said, 'Wait, my daughter, until you know how the matter turns out; for the man will not rest until he has settled it today.'" She knew Boaz's character and she knew that Boaz would act upon it, and we'll see the outcome, we'll look at the outcome of it next time as we look at chapter 4.

But for now, what I want to do here is to just bring out a little bit of practical perspective on Christian living in light of divine providence. There are some things here that I want to point out that I think are right there in the text for you to see, things that would give you perspective on how to respond when providence is actively moving forward in your life.

So what can we say about this? What can we say about providence? Living in light of divine providence? Living in light of the fact that God is sovereign over all things? We need to think carefully about it, frankly, you know, because there are some who would distort and even mock the doctrine of God's providence, of God's sovereignty, and say, "Well, if God's sovereign, that there's nothing for me to do. We'll just let God do it all." And they become inactive in light of that. Others who would neglect sovereignty either through ignorance or unbelief, and somehow think that life depends on them and they don't have room in their mind and in their worldview to let God work certain things out

without their influence and manipulation. What I want to do here this evening in just a few brief minutes is hopefully navigate some balance for you as you think about it.

You know, if you've been at Truth Community at all, you've heard teaching on divine providence; you know that that's what we believe and teach. God continually upholds all of his creation and is sovereignly at work in absolutely everything that happens so that whatever happens is an outworking ultimately of the purpose of God. That we believe in that and we rest in that. We rest in that in the midst of tragedy; we rest in that and give thanks when good things happen. So we are content and we're at peace because we realize that we are in the hand of God with our lives.

And what do you do when you believe that? I'm going to give you two points and it's going to seem like they are in contradiction but they're not. First of all, if you believe in divine providence, what do you do? How do you live in light of divine providence? First of all, you act on divine providence. You act on divine providence. You see, divine providence, God's providence, does not excuse you from responsibility. It doesn't excuse you from needing to act and to use your judgment and to take initiative in response to the circumstances that are in your life. You see that by the fact that Naomi initiated her care for Ruth. Naomi spoke and gave direction to Ruth and sent her to Boaz. She believed, Naomi believed in divine providence and yet she didn't just sit back and say, "Well, I'll let those two work it out. I don't want to get involved." No, she was very active and pointed and direct in what she told Ruth to do. Ruth acted on Naomi's counsel. She went and did exactly what Naomi had told her to do. Boaz acted on divine providence and blessed her, received her and said, "I'm going to do something. I'm going to go and I've got to talk to the closer relative tomorrow." So all of them are acting in a way that does not presume on providence to do it for them. And you and I, as we live in light of divine providence, we need to recognize our responsibilities and let Scripture inform them, and then act in accordance with scriptural principles.

For you younger people that are in the audience, you're under the authority of your parents, well, you act on divine providence by being responsive to the leading and teaching and instruction of your parents. You don't disobey your parents and still proclaim a belief in divine providence. That doesn't work. Divine providence means you recognize your responsibilities and you act upon them. Husbands loving their wives. Wives responding to their husbands. Workers acting in accordance with their responsibilities at work. All of those things. Your activity expresses your obedience to Scripture. You don't simply sit back inactive and passive when you believe in divine providence, it actually engages you in life. Believing in divine providence actually gives you reason to act. You say, "There is purpose in my act because God is in it. And there is a certain result that is sure to come even though I don't know what that result might be. There is meaning in my act because God's hand is in whatever I." So it motivates you to act, rather than disengaging your motivation to live life according to common sense and biblical principles. So you act on divine providence. When you see providence on display, you take and you go and you act on it and you further it.

Now, secondly, you act on providence but there's another side to it, another side to the coin. It almost seems contradictory but it's not. Secondly, you wait on providence. You wait on providence. You give room for providence to play out and not force things through manipulation; not to violate principle in order to achieve the result that you want. So for example, Ruth waited on providence in a simple way when she simply waited at Boaz's feet during the night; waited for that moment when he wakes up in a start and the conversation takes place. She patiently waits on it. She patiently carries out Naomi's instruction without injecting herself into it prematurely into a conversation.

Boaz waited to hear the response of the closer relative about redeeming Ruth. He didn't violate principle. He didn't violate someone else's prerogatives or presume upon them and said, "Yes, Ruth, I'll marry you. We won't worry about this closer relative." He was content to let providence play out, to wait on providence, and to do the right thing even though at the moment it might have seemed to jeopardize what he wanted to happen. There are times where you act on principle even though it seems like acting on principle will be contrary to your self-interest. You honor the principle and in honoring the principle, you honor divine providence by letting it play out rather than violating principle in order to achieve the result that you want. Naomi at the end of chapter 3 says, "Wait, Ruth. Wait on Boaz to handle the situation."

So there are times in divine providence where you act. There are times where biblical principle requires you to wait. The decision, the authority for the decision, doesn't belong to you, and therefore you have to wait on the one above you or the one outside you to make their decision and then you live in response to that rather than manipulating people or circumstances to bring about the desired result. So when we wait on divine providence, we're mindful of letting that inform the way that we think about life. "God is in control here. I can trust God for it." And we honor principles, biblical principles, rather than violating them in order to get what we want.

You know, one of the surest ways, this has always been helpful to me, one of the surest ways to wait on divine providence and to honor it as a principle is to trust those and to defer to those who have authority over you as they are making decisions, whether it's in a workplace environment, a family situation, in a church, in government. Those who have authority have it because God has given it to them, and you trust as they are exercising their authority, that God is going to work out his providence in a way that furthers his purposes for your life. You don't defy authority. You don't violate authority. You don't rebel against authority and say at the same time that you believe in God's providence. Just as God's providence is in control of your circumstances, he's also in control of those who have authority over you. Proverbs 21:1, I think it is, maybe chapter 20 says that, "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it wherever he wishes." So one of the surest ways to follow divine providence is to honor the lines of authority that are above you and to not violate them or go around them. And what does that do? What does it say to us? Your patience, that willingness to wait as things play out, is expressing your trust in God. You act on providence, you act on principle showing your obedience to Scripture. You wait when that is necessary and that expresses your trust in the God who holds providence in his hand. Act on providence, you wait on providence.

You say, "How do I know the difference? How do I know whether I'm supposed act or wait at any particular point?" That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? That's the question that humbles us and brings us to our knees before the Lord and asks him for wisdom because it's not always going to be clear whether you're supposed act or to wait. There is a tension that is involved that brings us to a spirit of dependence on the Lord and casting ourselves on him and then recognizing that when the time to act is there, we act and sometimes we wait and give God more time to work it out through other means.

So divine providence is a rich doctrine. It is a certain doctrine. It is one of the great reposes of our soul, and we live life in light of it. Not a moment of our life is unaffected by what we think about divine providence. And, you know, in thinking about it in eternal terms and in terms of our salvation, we look back and we remember how in God's providence he brought people who knew Christ into our lives. Maybe you were born into a Christian family and God gave you Christian parents who were able to explain to you and took the time to teach you that Christ is the Savior of sinners and that you need to repent and put your faith in Christ in order to have eternal life and the forgiveness of your sins. Maybe you're like me and that had to come from outside. But in providence, God brought someone to you, brought something to you, that made Jesus Christ known to you; that opened up the word of God to you in a way that showed your need of a Savior, made Christ plain as the Savior to be received, and so worked and influenced your heart that you received Christ in salvation.

What a glory that is, that God's providence is not just seen in relationships and earthly circumstances, but the very fact that we are here and that we are born again Christians gathered around the word of God tonight is an expression of the mighty saving power of Christ and the mighty power of God's providence to lead us into all of those influences that would one day cause us to turn our hearts to Christ, to bend the knee and to receive him and to be born again, not following a strict order of salvation there but that's okay. To receive Christ and to enter into new life. What a joy to know that we are in the hands of a sovereign God from beginning to end and that the God who ordained our circumstances to bring us to this point, who has shown grace in the past, will most certainly show grace in the future. He hasn't exhausted his grace. He hasn't exhausted his sovereignty in your life. He has just begun to display it. And so we rest in a sovereign, providential hand that has our good in mind knowing that he will carry us safely home and what he has begun in our salvation, he will most certainly complete.

Let's bow in prayer before this great and sovereign God.

*Our Father, we do thank you for your great and sovereign hand, and we ask, Father, in an initial sense that you would give us the wisdom to discern the times in life where we need to act on divine providence and in other ways, in other times, Father, to wait to give you time to unfold your purposes, knowing that you don't unfold everything all at once; you don't unfold it on our timetable, sometimes we wait for 10 or 20 or 30 years to see your purposes unfold. Father, give us the grace to wait. Give us the wisdom to act when the time is right and help us to just see the difference between the two.*

*Father, on a deeper level, we thank you for the great work, the sovereign work that you did in our salvation. Father, we thank you that you chose us before time began, and that it was certain when Christ went to the cross, he was dying for us by name. He redeemed us in a particular way, in a way that his death guaranteed the outcome of our salvation, and it was in furtherance of your divine choice before time began. And we thank you for the way that the Spirit worked in our hearts. There was a sameness to the way that we came to Christ and yet each story has its own unique dimensions. Thank you for the way that the Spirit worked in our individual lives and brought us to faith in Christ. Thank you now, Father, that we are under your providential hand and that we live life in a certain security, a security that is certain that your hand is at work in everything that happens to us and there is never any need for doubt, fear, or worry because you oversee every detail of our lives down to the number of hairs on our head.*

*We thank you for that, Father, and we thank you that it is your declared, your revealed divine purpose to exercise the fullness of your sovereign power to guarantee that we enter into that inheritance that you secured for us, that Christ purchased for us, that that inheritance reserved for us in heaven will one day become our present possession. Still future now, but so certain as if we own it and already have it, Father, we are grateful for that. We're grateful for the way that you work. We're grateful for your power. We thank you that we can rest in it and we commit ourselves even now to trust in your providence as we go forward in this new year. Thank you for your wonderful grace in our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

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