

SERIES: The Gospel According to Ruth
SERMON: **Behind a Frowning Providence**
SCRIPTURE: Ruth 1:1-22
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It's good to be back with you today. I have been out of town for most of the last month, but now I have to make up for it by preaching ten of the next twelve Sundays. Josh, as you may know, will be taking 15 hours at seminary this summer, so he will only be able to preach one time in the next three months. We will miss him. I appreciate his good ministry in my absence. I'm going to spend the next month preaching from Ruth, who as an ancestress of Jesus was one of the most important mothers of the Bible.

Ruth comes right after the Book of Judges, to which it was actually attached in the Hebrew Bible. If you have read the book of Judges you know it to be a depressing book in many ways, revealing the dark side of humanity as few portions of Scripture do. The very last verse of the book sort of says it all: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The book of Ruth, however, will reveal that even in the darkest of times there is a godly remnant who seek God's face, obey His commandments, and experience great blessing.

The Book of Ruth is one of the two books in the Bible that bears the name of a woman. The other is, of course, the book of Esther, which we will, Lord willing, be preaching through right after Ruth. Interestingly, Ruth is the story of a Gentile girl who was taken in by the Jews and married a Jew, while Esther is the story of a Jewish girl who was taken in by the Gentiles and married a Gentile. Both, thankfully, are godly examples.

I want us to consider several reasons why it is wise and good for us to spend a whole month studying this brief book. First, it is the Word of God. All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable—OT as well as new, narrative literature as well as doctrinal. Paul said of the OT Scripture that "everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (Rom. 15:4).

The message of Ruth is filled with God-inspired hope that points to Jesus Christ. It provides us with one of the clearest pictures in all of Scripture of the glory of our redemption in Christ. It will amaze you if you have never studied it before; it will thrill you if you are hearing it all over again. In fact, this is the reason why I have borrowed the title for the series from one of my colleagues in St. Louis—*The Gospel According to Ruth*.

Second, Ruth is a charming love story, and everyone enjoys a good love story. I must admit that it starts out as a rather unusual kind of love story, telling of the love between a woman and her mother-in-law. Mothers-in-law tend to receive a lot of bad press, and I think much of it is exaggerated for the sake of humor. Not that *everyone* is laughing, of course, for there are indeed some sorry examples of poor relationships with mothers-in-law. But Ruth demonstrates what this relationship can become when just one person puts heart and soul into it.

But the book of Ruth becomes a more common type of love story in chapter two as the relationship between Ruth and Boaz develops. This love story presents a portrait of manhood and womanhood that is far beyond the highly sensualized picture of human love we see today. John Piper writes, “In making sex the main thing, the modern world is losing the glory and beauty and depth and power of what sexuality becomes when it runs like a deep and mighty river between the high banks of righteousness.”¹ We need heroes like Ruth and Boaz.

Third, the book of Ruth contains one of the most profound revelations of the providence of God found anywhere in Scripture. Biblical Christians don’t believe in luck, in randomness, or in fate, for Ephesians 1 tells us that God works all things after the counsel of His own will. The Bible doesn’t, however, teach that God always rules by direct action. Oh, once in a while He does, and at such times we speak of the results as sovereign displays of divine power. But most of the time God works behind the scenes, employing good or evil circumstances to bring about His will. Theologians call that providence. We enjoy God’s providence when it entails blessing, but we tend to struggle with it when it involves suffering.

One of the key questions for believers in any age, today included, is “Can I trust God when He allows pain and suffering in my life, particularly when I see little or no purpose in it?” William Cowper, an 18th century poet wrote these words to encourage us to answer that question in the affirmative:

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

The story of Ruth is one of the most graphic illustrations of the smiling face behind a frowning providence.

We’re going to read the first chapter of the Book of Ruth. I ask you to please follow the story closely because we will not re-read most of it as we teach.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your

mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me--even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons--would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!"

At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

"Don't call me Naomi, " she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

I've really got two outlines in your bulletin this morning. One follows the story line; the other focuses upon the four theological truths behind the story. The story begins with the tragic account of a Jewish family of four facing famine.

Naomi of Bethlehem endures great suffering during a famine. (1:1-5)

The father of this family, Elimelech, decided they should move temporarily to the country of Moab. So he took his wife Naomi, and his two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, and they moved to Moab. There Elimelech died of unknown causes. The two boys then married Moabite women, but they also died. In just ten years' time Naomi lost all three of the important men in her life. It's hard to imagine greater suffering by one person.

Theological truth #1: God in His providence at times allows great pain into the lives of His children.

Suffering is part and parcel of human life. We may talk about it as “bad luck” or “ill fate,” or “unfortunate circumstances,” but the Scriptures make it clear that nothing happens to God’s children that is not within His permissive will.

1. Sometimes suffering is discipline for disobedience. Elimelech’s decision to leave Bethlehem and take his family to Moab sounds innocent enough. After all, a man has to feed his family. But it is innocent only on the surface. You see, Bethlehem itself means “house of bread,” and God had made certain promises to His people concerning famines. For example, in Psalm 33:18-19 we read these words: “The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.”

Generally when God brought a famine on the land (and at least 13 of them are recorded in the Scriptures), it was to test His people, not to starve them. Even Naomi admits in verse 21 that they were full when they left Bethlehem for Moab. Apparently Elimelech wanted to escape the coming test rather than trust God through it.

But the problem is not simply in respect to what Elimelech’s family *left*—it also has to do with where they *went*—to Moab. Moab was a country to the east of the Holy Land that God had placed under a curse for failing to give Moses and the children of Israel safe passage while on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. In fact, God says of Moab in Psalm 108:9, “Moab is my washbasin.” In contemporary jargon we might translate that, “Moab is my garbage can.”

In effect, this family left the “house of bread” to seek food in a garbage can. And Moab really *was* a garbage can, spiritually speaking. The Moabites were pagan polytheists who worshiped demons and practiced child sacrifice. It was not the kind of place a godly father should have taken his family, even during a famine.

Was Elimelech’s death a result of divine discipline? Verse 3 doesn’t mention a specific cause of death, but Naomi certainly thought God was behind it (13, 20-21), and she was closer to the situation than we are. Then we have the deaths of Mahlon and Kilion shortly after their marriages to Moabite women, before they are even able to have children. While once again no direct cause of death is mentioned, it seems hard not to read between the lines that this too was divine discipline for marrying outside the covenant people.ⁱⁱ

2. Sometimes suffering is because of *someone else’s* disobedience. Naomi may have been an innocent victim of her husband’s actions (we can’t know for sure whether she helped make the decision to go to Moab), but suffering came upon her, too. And Elimelech’s decision to go to Moab certainly impacted his sons. As long as he was alive, Elimelech may have been able to exercise proper spiritual oversight over his sons, even though they were in a pagan country. But with Elimelech out of the picture, I suspect their mother was no longer able to control them, and so they married Moabite women.

There’s a spiritual lesson for parents here. If, in the face of the tests God brings your way, you

compromise His will for your life, you may compromise the will of God for the lives of your children as well. Elimelech may have thought he was moving to Moab for the sake of his sons, but his choice resulted in something he would never have wanted for them. Many Christian businessmen work an inordinate number of hours, convincing themselves they are doing it for the sake of their wife and kids. But the wife and kids would gladly exchange some of the good things of life that Dad is providing for more of Dad's time. Our bad choices affect not only ourselves but also those we love.

But it would be wrong to imply that suffering is always discipline for disobedience.

3. Sometimes suffering happens simply because we live in a fallen world. Jesus made it clear in Luke 13 that natural tragedies don't always come on the worst sinners. He reminded his audience of 18 people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them, and then asked, "Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" A negative answer was expected.

There is no certain connection between our suffering and our behavior. Psalm 34:19 says, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all." And Acts 14:22 tells us that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." In fact, the one who suffered most deserved it least: Jesus Himself.ⁱⁱⁱ

But suppose Naomi's suffering was indeed divine discipline for disobedience, and Ruth was brought into the family of God by sin. That makes the story doubly encouraging because it demonstrates God is able and willing to turn His judgments to our good. We must never think that the sin of our past means there is no hope for our future!

4. But suffering is never pointless; behind it all is the face of a sovereign, loving God. As Jesus told the Pharisees regarding the man born blind, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." Naomi suffered enormously. Whether it was her own disobedience, or her husband's disobedience, or even just because she lived in a fallen world, the fact remained—it was not beyond the knowledge and sovereignty of God. And He was about to use it all to His enormous glory and to Naomi's eternal benefit.

Naomi urges her two widowed daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to return to their home in Moab. (1:6-18)

Naomi receives word while in Moab that the Lord has come to the aid of His people back in Judah by providing them food. Of course, she shouldn't be surprised, because the Lord had promised to do that for His people. At any rate, she and her two daughters-in-law set out for Bethlehem.

On the way, however, Naomi has second thoughts. She tells Ruth and Orpah, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home." She is not ungrateful for their love and kindness to her and to her

sons, but she expresses the wish that they return home and find husbands in their home country. There are tears, and both girls object, “No, we want to go back with you to your people.”

But Naomi will have none of it. She appeals to a custom among the Jewish people called the Levirate Law of marriage. This law was designed to protect family names and family inheritances. Found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 it required the brother of a man who died childless to take the widow as his wife and have children by her so that name of the dead brother could be passed on.

Naomi suggests that Levirate marriage would be the girls' only hope for marriage in Israel, but even that is completely unrealistic. In the first place, Mahlon and Chilion have no more brothers to perform the duty, and even if Naomi were to get married that night and produce more sons, they would be far too young for Ruth and Orpah. Besides, Naomi claims she is too old to find another husband.

That's her argument, but the real issue is that Naomi has lost hope; she's become bitter; she thinks the Lord's hand is against her. She can see no good coming from the return of the girls with her. In effect she is saying, “Don't come with me because God is against me, and anyone around me is likely to get hurt, too.” (even though any godly person should be able to. But Naomi can't see it.

Theological truth #2: We can choose to become bitter when suffering, resulting in blindness to God's purposes.

Bitterness is a choice, not a necessity. But it is not a neutral choice. It is a choice that causes trouble and defiles many (Hebrews 12:15). One of the troubles it causes is blindness to reality. Naomi can't even see that no matter what their married status, Ruth and Orpah would surely be better off among the people of God than among pagan idolaters! But there is more. Listen to John Piper's observations:

Seeing is a precious gift. And bitterness is a powerful blindness. What would Naomi say if she could see only a fraction of the thousands of things God was doing in the bitter providence of her life? For example, what if she knew that God was choosing an “unclean” outsider, a Moabitess . . . as the kind of person he wanted in the bloodline of his Son, so that no one could boast in Jewishness—or any other ethnicity? What if she knew that part of what God was doing was shaping a genealogy for the Messiah that would humble the world?

What if she could see that in Ruth she would gain a man-child, and that this man-child would be the grandfather of the greatest king of Israel, and that this king of Israel would be the ancestor of the King of kings, Jesus Christ, the Lord of the universe?

Scene 3 in our story line finds Orpah kissing her mother-in-law goodbye, and we never hear from her again.

Orpah returns home but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi and affirms her faithfulness (to

Naomi and to the God of Israel) in spite of her painful experiences. (1:14-18)

Orpah has been much criticized, but let it be said on her behalf that at least she started on the journey with Naomi, she expressed deep emotional attachment to her, and she didn't turn back until Naomi insisted. Perhaps she even had a noble motivation for leaving, like trying to keep Naomi's lot from worsening by having to support two daughters-in-law. I don't think we should be overly harsh with her.

But Ruth makes a better choice in spite of great obstacles. In fact, one would have to search a long time to find a situation in which there were more obstacles to a relationship than this one. There is the obstacle of background. Naomi is Jewish. Ruth is a Moabitess. That is not like saying today, "Naomi was French and Ruth was German." It is more like saying, "Naomi was Jewish and Ruth was a Palestinian." The Israelites and the Moabites were historical enemies—politically, morally, and religiously. Their customs were different, their language was different, their thought patterns were different. Everything about the background of Ruth was different from that of Naomi.

Reason also argued against Ruth's choice. As strange as it may seem, widows in that day were often looked upon with suspicion as possibly responsible in part for their husband's death, especially if young and childless. And that suspicion would have been particularly strong towards a foreign widow who had been married to a Jewish man. If Ruth went back with Naomi she would be asking for trouble.

Emotions also must have argued that Ruth should go back home. We can only assume she had family in Moab, and even in the unlikely event that she was an orphan, certainly she had childhood friends and would prefer to live in her own homeland rather than in a strange country.

Yet she responded with one of the most beautiful and profound expressions of faith, hope and love ever put into human language. Frankly, it's impossible to improve on the King James Version (1:16-18):

*Entreat me not to leave thee
or to return from following after thee,
For whither thou goest, I will go;
And where thou lodgest, I will lodge.
Thy people shall be my people.
And thy God my God.
Where thou diest, will I die
And there will I be buried
The Lord do so to me, and more also,
if ought but death part thee and me."*

There are basically six affirmations in Ruth's statement. The first is, "I will go where you go." The rough and dangerous road back to Palestine and the inevitable fatigue made no difference—if Naomi could make the journey, so could Ruth. "I will lodge where you lodge." If it meant

settling down permanently in a strange land, then so be it. “Your people shall be my people.” To live in a strange land is one thing. But to adopt a strange people is something else. The customs are different, as is the diet, and the sense of humor, the values.

But the most amazing commitment is the fourth one: “Your God shall be my God.” Naomi has just said in verse 13, “The hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” Her reaction to God’s providence is bitterness, yet Ruth forsakes her own religious heritage and makes the God of Naomi her God. She had apparently seen enough evidence of God’s existence and faithfulness to overcome Naomi’s negativity and put her trust in God.

“I will die where you die.” Ruth’s commitment is not a temporary one. She is casting her lot with Naomi and the decision is permanent. And then she even adds, “There I will be buried.” In those days the place of burial was deemed quite significant, and it was common to go to great lengths to return a traveler’s body to his homeland. Ruth is saying, “So permanent is my decision that I do not even want my *body* returned to Moab.” Her resolve is firm and final.

It’s not difficult to see why these verses are used in weddings, is it? If only all marriages today were really built upon such a commitment. But more importantly, think with me about these affirmations of faith as they relate to a commitment to Christ.

I’ll go where you go. . .

I’ll lodge where you lodge. . .

Your people shall be my people. . .

In Luke 14 Jesus says to the multitude following after Him, “If anyone is not willing to give up all that he has and does not take up his cross daily, he cannot be my disciple.” We don’t see too much of that kind of commitment today, unfortunately. Many are glad to follow Christ so long as life is comfortable. But when the cost gets heavy, or one’s lifestyle is threatened, or when important relationships are challenged, some kiss Him goodbye as Orpah did Naomi.

But in verse 18 that “When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.”

Theological truth #3: We can choose to live with gratitude, courage and trust instead of bitterness.

Ruth, you know, suffered under the frowning providence of God just as Naomi did. But her response is so very different. It’s as though she had read Hebrews 12:11, which wouldn’t even be written for a dozen centuries: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” Bitterness may be a choice, but so is gratitude and courage trust and even happiness.

Ruth and Naomi arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest is beginning. (1:22)

It says “the whole town was stirred because of them.” Was it because Naomi had aged 30 years in that decade? Was it the sad and bitter countenance on Naomi’s face? There was apparently something about her appearance that caused them to exclaim, “Can this be Naomi?”

Her response reveals her attitude: “Don’t call me Naomi (which means “pleasant” or “sweet.”). Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.” The KJV reads “The Lord has brought me *home again empty*.” There’s both tragedy and blessing in that phrase. The tragedy is that so often we won’t come home until we’re empty. The Prodigal Son didn’t, Jonah didn’t, Naomi didn’t. The blessing is that God did eventually bring them all back.

I heard the story of a fisherman who was out at sea one day when a sudden storm came up. The clouds darkened the sky, the waves obscured the land, and soon the fisherman was totally disoriented and didn’t even know which direction to go to land. He had given up all for lost, when suddenly he saw a strange flare of light on the horizon. He decided this must indicate land of some kind and he headed for it. And sure enough, he came safely to land through the storm, but only to find out that the light he had seen was a fire consuming his own house.

How tragic that God sometimes has to devour with the flames of His discipline the very things upon which our hearts are most dearly set—our possessions, a cherished relationship, our health, our job, our financial security, whatever it takes. Sometimes God has to send it up in flames in order to bring us home.

Theological truth # 4: God’s providence is sometimes hard, but all His purposes and His timing are for His glory and the greater happiness of His children.

The last verse of the first chapter seems insignificant but actually speaks volumes: “So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.” The barley harvest is what God is going to use to turn their suffering into glory. That’s how God operates. Rarely does He invade our world with sovereign displays of power. There are no miracles in the book of Ruth, at least no first-class ones. But His providence is operating full steam ahead, leaving His fingerprints all over the lives of His children. Like most fingerprints, they are not real obvious. Sometimes it takes the work of a forensic expert to actually discern them, but they are there.

I quote William Cowper once more, only this time I want to add two more verses of his poem:

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste
But sweet will be the flower.*

Conclusion: Think with me how different this whole story would be if verse 19 read instead, “But after one more urging from her mother-in-law, Ruth finally gave in and returned to Moab.” Is your expression of commitment to Christ more like Orpah's or Ruth's. Both girls started on the journey with Naomi. Both cried and wept. But while Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, Ruth clung to her.

The evidence of true faith is not in the verbalization but in the perseverance. I entreat you to commit your heart and life to Him, knowing full well that the obstacles are great and the cost is high, but the rewards are higher still.

i. John Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, 13.

ii. I find it very troubling that in spite of the clear teaching of both the OT and the NT that a believer is not to marry an unbeliever, many Christian young people persist in dating outside the faith, thinking somehow that God's Word applies to others, but not to them. Some even try evangelistic dating, but that almost never works. I wouldn't suggest that if you marry an unbeliever God will immediately strike you dead, but I do believe you are asking for the discipline of the Lord. The fact that one of the wives of these two young men became a believer does not justify the decision he made to marry outside the covenant.

iii. Piper, 45-46.