

Sin, Suffering Single Ladies, and Sovereign Kindness (Ruth 1:1-6)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on November 8, 2009

www.goldcountrybaptist.org

Ruth 1 ¹ Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. ³ Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. ⁵ Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.

Ruth is a little book with a big message of a Big God who was and is and is to come, and always will be, a God of sovereign kindness. It is not always easy to see through eyes blurred by life's burdens and pain, but despite suffering, despite sin, despite circumstances that shake the faith of believers and make them ask "why?" at times, God's sovereign kindness is constantly providentially lovingly personally graciously intimately involved in every event of our everyday lives by God's ever-present yet invisible hands.

There may be no better or more beautiful illustration of God's providence than this little tender story that takes two ladies from tragedy to triumph. It's a touching and moving short story (only 84 verses but full of big truth), well-loved by many, a love story, a drama, a story of redemption. It's a true story that is a vivid visual picture of the greatest story ever told, that we love to tell, picturing the old, old story, of Jesus and His love, from the Old Testament.

'The book of Ruth is nothing short of a literary masterpiece [of course inspired by God of true events]. In the 18th century Dr. Samuel Johnson, a Christian, read a copy of Ruth before a prestigious London book review club and did so as if it were a recently written work. The club was vocal and unanimous in its praise of this new work. It was only after their acclaim abated that Dr. Johnson inform them that the masterpiece they had so unreservedly endorsed was to be found in a book they all rejected—the Bible! ... we see that Ruth's literary genius is recognized even by those with no Christian allegiance.

A very similar story is told of Benjamin Franklin who while serving at the French court heard some aristocrats denigrating Holy Bible as not worth reading, lacking style, etc. Although Franklin was not a born again believer (as best can be discerned from written descriptions of his beliefs), he had been sufficiently exposed to the merits of Scripture as literature that he foisted the following ... on the French skeptics. Franklin proceeded to copy Ruth in longhand, changing all the names to French names. He then read the manuscript to the aristocratic elitists who to a man praised the elegance and simple style of the touching story. One then queried Franklin "But where did you find this gem of literature, Monsieur Franklin?" Franklin quipped "It comes from that Book you so despise, la sainte Bible!"¹

I want to encourage you to try and look at these opening verses tonight as if you've never read them before, as if you don't know the rest of the story. Try and put yourselves in Naomi's shoes.

Everything in the life of Naomi unravels in the first 5 verses of this book. There are 3 funerals in 3 just verses (v. 3-5), not just 1 tragedy, but 3 on top of each other, compounding her grief. All 3 of her immediate family members she loved were taken away from her, and it's recorded here in cold print as if to portray the cold effect of this anguish.

Can you imagine losing all you hold dear in such a relatively short period of time? Your spouse is gone, and a huge part of your heart died at the same time, and the pain stubbornly doesn't feel like it will ever go away, it's a knife that stabbed, then turned again, then again. I can't pretend to know what Naomi felt like but try to grasp what's taking place here. She has buried her beloved, and then before long she has to bury one of her sons! And then her only remaining son and family member dies and she buries him, too! The literary camera is zooming in, as it were, to Naomi's face ...

William Cowper wrote some beautiful hymns in our hymnal, like "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood" ... but he also had dark times of deep depression, even contemplating suicide at times, battling despair in ways you might be surprised to know a true Christian struggles in, because few talk about it. His emotions knew what it was like to be tossed to and fro and battered by waves on the sea of life. He went through spiritual droughts and storms and dreaded dark clouds. He believed God's kind providence and faithfulness, but felt God was frowning on him in his experience.

Ruth 1:1 begins with a famine in the time of the judges, which was also a very dark time in Israel's history, a time of sin, suffering, and spiritual famine and dryness along with physical famine. In fact, if you read back just one page in your Bible, the very last verse of Judges (21:25) says: *In those days there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

In that setting, some of God's remnant of believers struggled like Cowper. Some asked why of God, where is God, does He care? Is He there? I thought God promised blessing for the Promised Land? Why is there a famine? Why is there so much sin going on and it seems like God isn't doing anything about it? Why do His own people suffer so much, and our godless enemies seem to prosper? God was where He had always been, doing what He always does, working His sovereign purposes patiently beyond what man sees, but Israel's emotions needed to catch up with their theology, as one of my good young pastor friends shared with me recently that good advice he received when he was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis ... "Jean-Paul, you need to give it some time to let your emotions catch up with your theology." We'll see that dynamic in the story of Ruth, which more than one writer has argued could really be the story of Naomi. Actually I think it's really the story of ... God.

William Cowper wrote a hymn that really expresses this book's theme in wonderful ways:

*God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea And rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs And works His sovereign will.
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break In blessings on your head.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face ...*

In v. 1-6 we see sin, suffering single ladies & sovereign kindness

SIN

¹ *Now it came about in the days when the judges governed ...*

The first line of this book is a little like the first line of one Charles Dickens book “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times” ... except, in for Israel, it was really more “the worst of times”! In our English Bible, there is an intentional placing of Ruth right after Judges, so that you read this line on the backdrop of a bleak book that doesn’t end on a very encouraging note: “sin, sin, and more sin – everyone doing whatever they wanted, whatever was right in their own eyes, a moral relativism, no king, no standards.”

If you read through the book of Judges you can appreciate the historical darkness and depressing sinful setting that shows the need for a redeemer as pictured in Ruth.

One writer sums up the downward spiral through Judges (sin – judgment – repentance – deliverance – rest → sin again, etc....):

‘As the Book of Judges progresses ... there is a change in the nature of the deliverers who are sent and the deliverance God’s people receive. The first judge, Othniel, is a squeaky-clean hero. The last judge, Samson [though, seemed often more naughty than Nazarite as pledged at birth, since he] ... systematically breaks every vow that was made on his behalf. Instead of avoiding contact with everything dead, he scoops honey from the corpse of a lion (Judg. 14:9). Instead of avoiding contact with the Philistines, he wants to marry one (Judg. 14:1-2). Instead of avoiding fermented drinks, he participates in a drinking party with his future Philistine in-laws (Judg. 14:10) ... The final chapters of the Book of Judges (Judg. 17-21) ... show us in graphic detail a nation that had comprehensively lost its way, becoming every bit as bad as the pagan nations that were the previous inhabitants of the Promised Land. Except for those times when God periodically sent a deliverer to rescue his people and turned their hearts back toward him, the days of the judges were a bleak, dark time of disobedience on the part of God’s people. Such disobedience was inevitably followed by God’s judgment resting upon their land, just as the covenant with Moses had threatened (Deut. 28[incl. famine]).’²

It’s on this black canvas background context that the jewel of God’s Providence shines more brightly in multi-faceted brilliance.

v. **1b** ... *And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons.* ² *The name of the man was Elimelech ...*

This Hebrew man Elimelech apparently came from a religious family (El = God, melech = King; his name = “my God is King”). But the question is was he living up to his name? Did Elimelech’s actions in this passage indicate that his Lord was King of his life?

The original readers wouldn’t have missed the fact that this man living in the middle of the promised land (Bethlehem in Judah) moved some 50 miles away to Moab, far away from the covenant community and worship of their covenant Lord Yahweh. Was God forefront in his mind, his faith in God, in this decision to bring his wife and kids away to this place?

The text probably suggested otherwise to the original readers, who were well familiar with the fact that Moab was not in the Bible belt of the Near East, even though the grass there may have looked greener on other side.

So much of the Bible goes back to Genesis, and this is also the case here. The OT Jews who first read or heard these first lines of Ruth would have thought of the first time Moab is mentioned, from Genesis 19, where Lot who also chose to live in a land that was not a godly place (maybe the closest place to Moab) simply because the grass looked greener there. The environment that Lot (also as a true believer) chose had an effect on his family, and the sad story in Gen. 19 was Lot's daughters got dad drunk and then committed incest with him to get pregnant. ³⁷ *The firstborn bore a son, and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day.*

In the time of Judges, Moab was the enemy of God's people and Moab's king had conquered Israel and forced the Jews to serve him for 18 years (Judges 3:12-14). Later in the book of Judges (Judges 11:17-18) it was a land Israel was not even allowed to pass through by the king of Moab. God and His OT prophets spoke out against Moab as a place and people of God's judgment, but in the earliest books of the OT, the books of Moses, here's just a sample of statements Ruth's original Jewish readers would have known of:

- The famous song of Miriam in Exodus 15 lists Moab as enemies of Israel that Yahweh delivered them from
- Deut. 2:9 *"Then the Lord said to me, 'Do not harass Moab ... for I will not give you any of their land as a possession'"*
- It was a well-watered land, and still is to this day, a good place to work good land physically speaking, but not spiritually speaking. God said in Psalm 60:8 *"Moab is my washbowl"*, i.e., the bowl used to wash dirty, dusty feet!
- Zephaniah 2:9 *"Therefore, as I live," declares the Lord of hosts, The God of Israel, "Surely Moab will be like Sodom ... like Gomorrah ... and a perpetual desolation"*
- The long list of OT prophets writing against Moab include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, but God's Word was against them from the beginning, from Moses' day:
- Numbers 21:29 *"Woe to you, O Moab! You are ruined, O people of Chemosh!"* Chemosh was the false god Moabites worshipped among other gods, child sacrifice was a part of that culture, and it went bad for Israel mixing with Moab:
- Numbers 25:1 *While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab [not the first place a faithful Jew might go to get his son a wife!]*
² *For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.* ³ *So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel.*
- Dt 23:3 *"No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord"*

That's the OT context and connotation of Moab.

Ruth 1:1 *Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons.*

It doesn't seem his concern was doing what was right in God's eyes. It doesn't seem he was concerned with his spiritual role to lead his family in worship as part of a covenant community or the spiritual toll that his sinful choices might have on them? He was, as the others of his time, doing "what was right in his own eyes."

² *The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there ...* ⁴ *They took for themselves Moabite women as wives ...*

In v. 1, it just says they "sojourned" there originally. It may not have been dad's plan to remain there at first (it's not clear if he had a real plan or was just aimlessly and faithlessly making it up as he went, as so many men still do) but they stayed, settled there more than a decade, in a sinful place of sinful idolatry and these were sinful marriages to idolatrous Moabites (how do I know that? v.15)

Marrying Moabite women was the downfall of Solomon (not to mention a few hundred others he married [!], but for Solomon it was Moabite women and their gods in particular that led astray), and it was the downfall of Israelite men in Nehemiah's day as well.

It's a sobering reality, but the leadership and direction and choices we make as men for our family typically determine their destiny.

- This dad appears to be walking by sight not faith here
- This dad apparently was majoring on the physical (it was all about where he wanted to live or could make more), to the neglect of the spiritual, which is far more important
- This family perhaps is trying to run from their problems rather than repent and seek God's favor with God's people
- It seems that they assumed if they had to pray "give us this day our daily bread" (literally), they assumed that meant they should leave and find a more prosperous place no matter the cost, rather than wait and trust God some more

But ... despite sin around them, despite sin of even God's people during these days of the Judges, despite what may have been their own sinful choices, despite what definitely were sinful marriages outside their covenant faith -- the good news, the refreshing glorious news of this book is that even those things are not beyond the grace of God in His sovereign kindness to His sinful people!

Rick Kress said it well:

'Elimelech and his family are more like us than we may think. How often have we acted prudently according to so-called logical standards, or the current culture's standards, but not consulted God and His Word? ... Many of us have taken worldly shortcuts and have found ourselves suffering the painful consequences. But Ruth was written to remind us that for those who will return to God, His grace and loyal love can shine beautifully and brightly in spite of the darkness of our sin and failure – and *not only in spite of our sin*, but amazingly – even *through it*. He can cause even our sin to somehow turn out for the greater good and advance of His glorious and good plan ...

Will the trials of life push us toward God, or will we question God's goodness and seek worldly-wise solutions? Will the pain of life and the decisions we've made, push us toward God or solidify us in our distance from Him? We are all bearing the pain and consequences of the unfaithfulness of those who profess to be believers but do not live for Christ. Yet there is hope for those who will return to the Lord. He can use even our sinful past to bring about His glorious future ...'³

As we consider this first point about their sin and ours, let us also consider this message we'll see at every point in our study of this book: nothing can thwart the plan and purpose of God. If He needs to use suffering to bring us all the way back, He will in His love. 'Affliction is God's shepherd dog to drive us back to the fold.'

Which brings us to the 2nd picture: **A Suffering Single Lady**

³ *Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years [but they bore no children, another stigma to Jews]. ⁵ Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.*

A woman without a husband or sons to take care of her in biblical times was a desperate situation of suffering, at death's door. The plight of a single mother in Naomi's position could not be more serious with no family, far away from her own people, no system in ancient pagan societies to care for people in her situation. Widows in their distress were truly in dire straits in every sense.

In our sinful world, people suffer, sometimes because of their sin, sometimes because of others, always because of sin in general. If you were to ask me "why do bad things happen to good people," I want you to know I have finally found the answer. I know many great theologians have struggled to answer that question, but it's very simple. I don't know why people struggle with the question. Why do bad things happen to good people? Answer: they don't.

What do I mean? Think about the question: why do bad things happen to good people? Why would I say they don't? It has to do with Romans 3 ... "*there is no one good, no not one.*" Now if you ask me a different question "why do some bad things happen to some while other bad things happen to others," I can't answer that one any better than anyone else. But we do see in this story (and everywhere in the Bible) that just because God usually doesn't tell us why He does what He does or what the future holds in His sovereign plan, that doesn't mean He is not involved in those details or that they're not part of His plan or that He doesn't care or that He isn't fully in control. God still loves us and is working in a way far more complex than our finite feeble minds can begin to make sense of or fully fathom. God is.

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

It takes trust when all you can see is the dark side of the cloud, and all you can see is the storm and don't know when it will stop. It takes trust when you have to pray for your daily bread not just as a rote prayer but as a radical cry for help that day lest you starve. We can't judge with our feeble sense what God is doing, but we need to trust Him for His grace which will be with us through the storm. There is a rainbow behind the clouds, there is God's smiling face.

God's purposes are deep, beyond what we can fully fathom:

*Deep in unfathomable mines Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs And works His sovereign will.*

How did Naomi get through this gut-wrenching horrific suffering? How did she make it through 3 funerals in a few years without doing what another OT wife said who lost her kids “curse God and die”? It wasn't because Naomi knew how the story ends. We know the end, we know about her ancestor, her great-great grandson, from the end of the book – but she never read the end of the book of Ruth. There's more we'll see about her suffering next time, but for this time I want us to close with what God her through, and this is the third part of our study:

Sovereign Kindness

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

The feared and dreaded clouds will not disappear for Naomi any time in chapter 1, but we should all take encouragement from what we read next and next week, because the dark clouds overhead were actually full of mercy that God will shower upon her in the future in His sovereign kindness. Naomi is shaken to the core of her being, but she doesn't abandon trust in her covenant Lord, and she doesn't just sit around doomed, depressed, doing nothing but dwelling on her despairing feelings and digging her a deeper hole.

⁶ *Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that **the LORD had visited His people in giving them food.*** [NKJV f.n. “the LORD attended to His people,” NIV “had come to the aid of His people,” NET “had shown concern for His people, reversing the famine by providing abundant crops”]⁷ *So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and **they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.***

The LORD never stops working for His people, never stops being concerned for them, and it's never too late for His people, faithless and foolish though we be, if we return (a word used at least 10x in this chapter, a Hebrew root behind the ideas of repenting, turning back, reversing course and going a different direction).

It was not just by chance that some in the fields of Moab travelled through first Israel and had seen the kindness of the LORD on His people, in fact it was evident even to these people who may have been unbelievers, that Israel's Lord was both sovereign and kind. It was not just by chance that Naomi happened to be in the fields of Moab to overhear those conversations of those who had seen how Yahweh had visited with kindness and food His covenant people in His steadfast mercy. It hadn't been just by chance that there was a famine in the first place, it wasn't just “mother nature” or an accidental weather change or some anomaly of global warming. And it wasn't just by fate or cruel forces that all the things in Naomi's life had occurred – no, this was Providence. And the God who moves in a mysterious way will now move in His sovereign kindness to move Naomi and her daughter back to where He wants them, which He certainly has His ways of doing. As someone said, ‘Affliction is God's shepherd dog to drive us back to the fold.’

Naomi knew the pain of seeing a spouse die, felt the struggle of being a single mom in a godless society trying to raise men without a godly influence in their life. She may have had remorse of the choices they made, watched her children make sinful decisions as they became adults, which pained her heart (marrying pagan Moabite women). And the final dagger: she saw both her two boys die. But ... God's sovereign kindness is still at work in her heart:

⁸ *And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. **May the LORD deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me.***

⁹ *"**May the LORD grant that you may find rest ...***

Things would still be bitter for Naomi for awhile before they get better, but sovereign kindness sustained her through her suffering. As this mother makes the long journey to Bethlehem, it's hard not to think of another mother making a long journey to Bethlehem as someone with a different stigma (pregnant out of wedlock). In this same little town of Bethlehem some twelve centuries later, the LORD visited His people in fields again in that area in sovereign kindness to announce that in that city of David a Savior had been born who was Christ the Lord. The LORD deals kindly (as v. 8 says) with all who turn to Jesus and who come to repent, He gives them rest, a truer rest than v. 9 expresses, salvation. No matter what you've done in the past, what you've suffered, sins you've committed, His grace is greater than all your sin if you repent and trust Him. This LORD, though they didn't know Him as Jesus yet, is the Redeemer at work in the book of Ruth as we'll see in future weeks. And as He taught about the prodigal son, when we repent and come back, He runs to meet us with open arms and joy.

The *Reformed Expository Commentary* says it well: 'In Christ, God comes running to meet us. Whereas Elimelech left the place of famine to seek a false blessing in Moab, Jesus Christ left the glories of heaven to bring us a true blessing on earth. Elimelech and Naomi sent themselves into exile from the land of promise, trying to build their own kingdom rather than waiting for God to do it; Jesus, though, went into exile from his Father's presence so that he might rescue us from our own kingdom-building and grant us a true and living future in his kingdom. The God who empties us and strips away, however painfully, those precious things in which we are trusting, [the same Lord firsthand] knows what it is to be stripped of all his possessions, left alone and abandoned by his friends, and hung empty on a cross. Every tear of loss that God inflicts on us is a tear whose cost he himself understands.

The pain of God's chastening work is therefore never .. more than is absolutely necessary to turn us to himself. It is measured and designed to show us the emptiness of the paths we have chosen for ourselves, so that we may return to his ways. What is more, when we do return to him, we discover that it is his delight to fill the void we have created ... What an awesome God he is! How great are his mercy and grace!'⁴

¹ http://www.preceptaustin.org/ruth_11-5.htm#1:1

² Iain Duguid, *Reformed Expository Commentary: Esther & Ruth*, p. 131.

³ *God in Everyday Life*, p. 19-20.

⁴ Duguid, 138.