

Behind a Frowning Providence God Hides a Smiling Face (Ruth 1:6-14)

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We're going to see once again that Naomi feels that the Providence of God is frowning at her, that God is against her, not for her. She recognizes the biblical truth of God's Providence, that a sovereign predestinating orchestrating plan of Almighty God governs all things, good and bad. But she and we need to be careful not to judge the Lord and what He is doing by our feeble sense/minds, certainly not by our feelings or circumstances. We need to trust God for His grace, behind what seems like a frowning providence. God for His people actually has a smiling face and a good and kind end for us in mind, even if we can't see it behind the dark clouds.

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. 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. 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. 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, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?" ¹² "Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." ¹⁴ And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Art Azurdia tells how 'Jonathan Edwards was a man who knew of God's dark providences in some profoundly agonizing ways. For example, his dear friend David Brainerd ... was invited into the Edwards home where he was nursed for the final months of his life until he died of tuberculosis. During those months, Brainerd, a young single man, fell in love with Edward's daughter Jerusha, who while caring for Brainerd contracted tuberculosis and died herself shortly thereafter. It was just a few months later when a severe dissension erupted in the Northampton congregation. To the great disdain of the people, Edwards refused to serve the Lord's supper to those who had made no profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Consequently in what proved to be perhaps one of the blackest moments on the American church history scene, Jonathan Edwards is fired by a vote of his congregation after 23 years of faithful pastoral ministry.

He immediately received offers from churches in New England and Great Britain. He moved instead out to the ... frontier to become a missionary to the Stockbridge Indians, during which time, providentially, he penned some of the most influential theological works ever written in the English language. Eight years later he was called to become president of ... Princeton ... [but a small-pox vaccination gone wrong] would prove to kill him. At one point while on his death bed he took note of the anxiety and fear of those around him, and though his throat was lined with nodules that made it impossible to even swallow water, he somehow managed to eke out these words: "Trust in God and you need not fear." A few days later he died, age 54.

His beloved [wife] Sarah, who herself was suffering from such rheumatism that she could barely manage to lift up her head, wrote a letter to their daughter Esther, one of their remaining 10 children. Esther had been married to Aaron Burr, Sr., who just shortly before had also died unexpectedly [like Naomi and Ruth, both widowed in a short amount of time]. Sarah wrote to Esther:

"What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore His goodness, that we had him so long. But my God lives; and He has my heart ... We are all given to God; and there I am and love to be."¹

Did you catch that theology that she caught from her husband? "God has covered us with a dark cloud ..." but the first part of the sentence and the sentence that follows affirms this God is good. She understood not only God's providence but God's love and smiling face behind the dark cloud she couldn't see through. Like Naomi, she was trusting God even when life hurts. There are two truths that must be kept in balance (that Naomi appears not to always keep in balance in this chapter): God is sovereign, and God is God. God is not only sovereign over our dark times, but He is good in all times.

You say, "that's easy for you to say, Pastor when not in my trial," and you may be right – but it wasn't easy for this wife to see whose husband had died, leaving his wife and 10 children, in a household where their beloved friend and beloved daughter had recently died. It wasn't easy truths for her daughter Esther, whose husband also suddenly died – but it was essential truths for these widows who must now look to their Maker as their husband, as Naomi and Ruth will in their story as well. As Sarah wrote "But my God lives and He has my heart" – reminiscent of Job's great confession in the midst of some of the darkest days of suffering and tragic loss of children that any human has ever experienced:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me! (Job 19:25-27 NIV)

Sarah Edwards's phrase "God lives" may also be an allusion to the widow speaking to Elijah (1 Kings 17:12) with the same phrase not knowing how the Lord would provide for her to live the next day. Or as the psalmist wrote "*The LORD liveth, and blessed be the rock, and let the God of my salvation be exalted*" (Ps 18:46)

What about when Sarah says of her husband's death "the Lord has done it." Is that unbiblical language? Amos 3:6 says calamity / disaster doesn't come to a city "*unless the LORD has done it?*" (ESV).

Naomi also believes in v. 13 that the Lord's hand was ultimately behind the calamity / disasters in her life, but that's not all Scripture has to say. God is not only providentially ruling over sin, suffering, singleness, Satan, and all secondary causes, but because God is *that sovereign*, He can even move the wills and hearts of sinful people, as Sarah Edward's letter also said: "He has made me adore His goodness, that we had him so long." What a difference in that perspective of providence that is married to God's goodness! She recognized God didn't owe her more than 20-some years of marriage it wasn't unkind to take him away so soon – she recognized how kind, gracious and good God was in letting her have a gift so long.

Sarah wrote her grieving daughter "Oh, that we may kiss the rod and lay our hand on our mouth." Kiss the rod? That could only be written by someone who had meditated on the 23rd Psalm "*Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me*" (even through the valley of the shadow of death Naomi is in, too). The Shepherd has to use the rod which hurts, but He is the Good Shepherd, and His rod is for our good not evil, and though sheep aren't very intelligent compared to the Shepherd (or even compared to other animals) the rod comforts

When Sarah Edwards writes we must "lay our hand on our mouth," she must have memorized what Job said after God spent 2 chapters affirming His sovereign control and care over everything good or bad that takes place in the universe: Job 40 (NASB95) ³*Then Job answered the LORD and said,* ⁴*"Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? **I lay my hand on my mouth.***

In that context, it means I will not complain against God, I will not find fault with God or demand He give me answers. It is possible to recognize the absolute sovereignty and providence of God in giving and taking away, in both good and evil, and yet not find fault or blame God or charge God with the sin or wrongdoing. We know that because Job said in Job 1:21-22 "*The LORD gave and **the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.***" *Through all this Job did not sin nor did he **blame** God.* (NASB)

- NKJV: *nor did he charge God with wrong*
- NIV: *Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing*

He tells his wife in chapter 2, v. 10: *Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.*

Job said those words maybe a thousand years before what Naomi says in verse 13 (and it was not wrong or sinful what Job said) and Naomi like him understands that trouble is from God as well as good, and that it is the Lord that takes away, even though sin and sickness and other secondary factors are at work in our lives.

End of v. 13: "*the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.*"

It was not wrong for Naomi to recognize the Lord's hand was in her suffering, or that ultimately the Lord had taken away. But she in this verse seems to have lost sight of the other half of the truth, that the same Lord gives and is good and will take care of her daughter-in-laws in Israel as well in His sovereign kindness.

End of v. 21: "... *the Almighty [Shaddai] has afflicted me.*"

Before we rush to correct what Naomi says, listen to some verses in the Hebrew Scriptures:

Gen 12:17 (ESV) “*The LORD afflicted*” (in Egypt)

The prophet Jeremiah said in Lamentations 1:12 “*The LORD hath afflicted me in the day of His fierce anger*” (KJV)

The prophets did not believe the Lord never afflicted, but they prayed like Isaiah 64:12 that He would not *afflict beyond measure*. Their hope was what the LORD said in Micah 4:6 “*In that day,*” declares the LORD, “*I will assemble the lame And gather the outcasts, Even those whom I have afflicted.*” (NASB)

They hoped in the relenting God of Nahum 1:12 *Thus says the LORD, “Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no longer.”*

The God of Providence can and does afflict even God’s people, but never forget God does it for a good purpose, even if man or Satan intends evil by it (Gen. 50:20). The Lord gave Paul an affliction, a thorn in the flesh that the text calls “a messenger of Satan,” and he prayed 3x that the Lord would take the trial away, but the answer was what God’s answer often is “*My grace is sufficient for thee. My strength is made perfect in weakness ...*” (2 Corinthians 12).

We will see Naomi’s weakness in chapter 1 but we will also see her faith. God doesn’t require perfect faith without flaws or faith without feelings or emotions, thank goodness for Naomi and for us. We will see that His grace was sufficient for her and it will be sufficient for you and me. And He is gracious in giving thorns to burst our bubbles of self-sufficiency to help us see His face.

In the first 5 verses of Ruth, there’s not much Naomi can see but the frowning Providence of God, but in verse 6 it begins to clear. But before we see the ray of light we must try to see her darkness.

John Angel James wrote *The Widow Directed to the Widow’s God*:

‘Who feels no sympathy for Naomi? There she is a widow! and a stranger in a strange land [Moab], distant from the house of her God, the means of grace, the ministers of true religion, the communion of the faithful—and surrounded only by heathen, and their abominable idolatries! Still her sons are with her, and also their wives ... Here then was a little circle of relatives ... who endeavored to hush the sorrows of her heart, and wipe away the tears from her eyes. But her cup of sorrow was now to be filled to the brim—for first one son followed his father to the grave—and then the other! Oh widows, think of her situation, bereft by this thrice-repeated blow, of her husband and only two children—and left with two widowed daughters-in-law—and they of pagan origin, in a land of idols! Observe now the conduct of this forlorn and desolate woman. Did she look round on her gloomy solitude and faint at the dreary prospect? No! She was evidently a woman of strong mind, and of stronger faith. She had not, perhaps, consented—but only submitted to the removal from the holy land of Judea. She felt in her extremity, that though far from the house and people of God—she was not far from his presence. And convinced of his all-mightiness, as well as of his all-sufficiency, she turned to his promise for comfort, and leaned upon his power for support. Recollecting her situation, she gathered up her thoughts, and these led her to Judea.’

Verse 6 begins with the phrase “*Then she arose*” – it’s as if she had been down and bent over up until this point in her mourning, but now she gets up. There’s a notable other passage where the same Hebrew phrase is used of someone who is named at the end of the book of Ruth, David. 2 Samuel 12:19-20 says after David mourned and had wept over his son, after the son had died, David *arose* and he came to the house of the LORD and worshipped.

Naomi has been away from any house of the Lord for more than a decade in Moab, outside of the covenant people and community but now she arose and is going to come back to the Lord’s people and ultimately, to the Lord. She had suffered hurt but she seems to know she needs to be back with the Lord’s people rather than stay on her own nursing her wounds, and now she is now coming back. It is always best to be with the imperfect people of God – we can always use one more. Those who isolate themselves from church because they’ve been burned are actually burning a bridge God made. But if you return, you reopen God’s major means of grace.

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.*

We don’t know all that was in her heart, but she hears in verse 6 and is reminded of where the Lord’s blessing is and she returns and puts herself in the environment of blessing again. Return is used at least 10x in this chapter, Heb. root behind the ideas of repenting, turning back, reversing course and going a different direction.

The end of the verse says God gave His people food, literally, it’s “bread” (*lehem*) which is part of the word *Bethlehem* (house of bread). The ancient Hebrew readers of Ruth may have also noticed something about that word “visited” that we may not and that we’ll understand more a little later in the book. The first time that Hebrew word is used in the OT (Gen. 21) it is used of the Lord *visiting* Sarah when she is beyond the human ability of conceiving or having a son and the Lord *visits* her, enabling her to have a son to fulfill the promise, a son in the line of the Messiah who would be born in Bethlehem as the OT prophets promised, the same town where Rachel was buried, wife of Jacob/Israel who fathered the 12 tribes. And more closely to the time Ruth was written, 1 Sam. 2:21 says the LORD *visited* another woman barren and unable to have a child and it is Samuel, another significant birth in redemptive history, a prophet who would anoint as King a boy named David who also was living in Bethlehem. And for now, in the book of Ruth, Naomi and Ruth who seem to have no human hope of an heir or son, Ruth who apparently was married for 10 years and unable to conceive, these 2 ladies are coming to ... Bethlehem. The drama of redemption history is so beautiful in its interweaving scenes.

Behind what Naomi thinks is God’s frown in what providence has brought here, there’s actually His smiling face on her, and this is the first ray of light to peak out from behind the dark cloud.

Four elements have been pointed out in verse 6 that combine to ‘paint a picture of divine grace. First, it was a gift from God that in the midst of her grief and pain Naomi was able to hear good news. Second, Naomi heard Yahweh had intervened on behalf of his people ... to come to the aid of ... Third, the object of the divine favor is identified as *ammô*, “his people,” the nation of Israel. The term expresses the normal covenant relationship between deity and people. The return of the rains was a signal that God had not forgotten or rejected them.

Fourth, Yahweh had given his people bread. The reader of Hebrew will recognize the play on the name Bethlehem. The “house of bread” is being restocked.

The narrator’s eyes of faith undoubtedly recognized in this gift of food the grace of God ... The reader will recognize here the providential hand of God, guiding natural and historical events for the fulfillment of his purpose and setting the stage for the ultimate emergence of David’s ancestor² [our ultimate kinsman-redeemer]

Similar language to the book of Ruth is used as the gospel begins in the NT with Zechariah’s wife miraculously enabled to bear a child in her old age who would be the forerunner of the Messiah:

Luke 1 ⁶⁷*And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:*
⁶⁸*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, For **He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people,*** ⁶⁹*And has raised up a horn of salvation for us **In the house of David** ... ⁷⁸*Because of the **tender mercy** of our God, With which **the Sunrise from on high will visit us,*** ⁷⁹***TO SHINE UPON THOSE WHO SIT IN DARKNESS AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH*** [what a picture we have of that in Naomi’s life, what a picture of this truth!] ...*

^{2:1}*Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth ... ⁴Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, **to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,*** ⁵*in order to register along with Mary [who just so happens to be descended from the family tree at the end of the book of Ruth] ...*

³⁶*And there was a prophetess, Anna ... She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷and then **as a widow to the age of eighty-four.** She **never left the temple,** serving night and day with fastings and prayers. ³⁸At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were **looking for the redemption** of Jerusalem.*

The Lord had visited His people again in the town of Bethlehem!

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. ⁸And 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.*

This is the second ray of light that Naomi can see peak out from behind the dark clouds overhead: the extraordinary kindness these two girls had given to their mother-in-law which she recognizes here. And Naomi’s heart is not too cold or calloused from her calamity that she doesn’t wish the same kindness upon them and more. She says “*May the LORD deal kindly with you ...*” using a word for the loyal lovingkindness of God, the steadfast love of the LORD that never ceases, His mercies that never come to an end.

The Lord wasn’t obligated to give Naomi a husband at all or the blessing of more than one son (a blessing not every mom has). The Lord didn’t have to allow them to get married, and certainly it would be normal when her daughter-in-laws were widowed that they would return to their own household for support and to seek remarriage from their own people. Not every woman wants to live with their mother-in-law (no offense to mother-in-laws, but it’s true!).

In Naomi's words she expresses faith that God's covenant kindness is not only still present in the world but that it can extend beyond the covenant community to these 2 Moabite women even if they return back home. Naomi may not feel like *she's* receiving God's lovingkindness by her view of her circumstances, but she doesn't abandon faith in it, and she does wish this lovingkindness on Orpah and Ruth from her heart of love

⁹*"May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband."*

In the original language this is a prayer for blessing and remarriage and the rest of the security and stability of a husband back home.

Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

Some writers are hard on Naomi later in this chapter, but the more I study this chapter the more I see the love and faith of Naomi and I think we should be gracious with her weaknesses as God was. And the text suggests the love and faith of this believer in the covenant Lord of Israel, though it was imperfect, it had an impact.

¹⁰*And they said to her, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people."* ¹¹*But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?"* ¹²*"Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons,* ¹³*would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters ...*

She's saying "you don't have to be a widow till death like me, you're still young and I'm thankful for your helping me this far but if you go back to Moab you have a chance to remarry from your people. You have been kind to me and now I want to repay that kindness by freeing you to go back with my blessing and love to seek kindness in marriage." Notice she is assuming that if they stay with her in Israel, their only hope for remarriage and being taken care of would be if Naomi had 2 more sons who would then do their duty in Jewish culture of marrying their brother's widow.

She's saying, "girls, you know I love you, but no one's going to want to marry an old maid like me, and even if I could reverse menopause and marry tonight and make a baby tonight, by some miracle or magic, twin boys, one for each of you ... are you going to wait 20 years to marry till you're beyond childbearing years as well? I may have to be single all my life, but you don't. Please, if you love me, leave me. Live the life I wasn't able to live in Moab, my daughters. I'll be fine back with my people here. I love you."

She knows Jewish women will frown on Moabite women and that any good Jewish boy's parents in a good Jewish community will only approve of or arrange for him to marry a good Jewish girl. Naomi knows how it is in the small town she grew up in and how the women talk and how they'll look at these girls (and her too). From her human viewpoint, she's right; Orpah and Ruth's chances look better if returning to Moab (but then there's *God's* viewpoint)

¹³... *No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.*"

Was this an incorrect statement? ... Don't answer too quickly.

Judges 2:15 *Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.* ¹⁶*Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them ...*

So in the book of Ruth, written during the time of the judges, there is this pattern that for the unrepentant, God *does* distress. But don't leave out the fact that He also makes a way of deliverance from it. The Lord's hand *does* go out against unrepentant people, but it's not for no purpose and it's not for an evil purpose, either. It's His kindness to do whatever it takes to lead us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). For those who love God and are called according to His purpose, He is working together for good (as God defines good, which is whatever is needed to makes us more like Christ as Paul says in the next sentence after Romans 8:28). And then in the next sentence Paul affirms that for God's repentant children "*God is for us, who can be against us?*" And he affirms that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, which was the treasured truth Sarah Edwards adored, and a truth Naomi will later see and adore as well.

Naomi never read Romans 8, of course, and never knew the full end of the story God was writing in her life, and in chapter 1 she can only see the dark underside of the cloud of what seems to be a frowning providence ... but another ray of light from a smiling God is now about to shine on her life if she will only have eyes to see it. She doesn't have to wait to get to Bethlehem, the blessing is standing right next to her, and next week we will see her speak for the first time in this story. And her first words are some of the brightest and most beautiful words in all of human history. And the light of covenant love (not mere human love but supernatural sovereignly-produced love from a covenant-keeping LORD) will shine magnificently and will show that though life can be very hard, God is not against His people. He is for them and is working for their good, and if we have eyes to see, His grace will dazzle us!

¹ Art Azurdia, www.spiritempoweredpreaching.com (message on Ruth 1:20-2:3)

² Daniel Block (1999). *Judges, Ruth*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, New American Commentary Volume 6:631.