

FBC POWELL, 11-19-17 AM
"The Amazing Providence of God"
Ruth 1:1-22
1 in Series "A Surprising Branch in Jesus' Family Tree"

Ruth 4:21-22 (NASB) "21 and to Salmon was born Boaz [Ruth's husband], and to Boaz, Obed, 22 and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David."

"Nowhere else in Scripture do we see God's intimate and tender care for women caught in the most dire of circumstances, including poverty, widowhood, grief, and homelessness. And nowhere else in the Old Testament do we find a woman of faith and calm assurance more vividly portrayed than in the story of Ruth."
— David Jeremiah

"Providence is that work of God in which He preserves all His creatures, is active in all that happens in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end."
- Louis Berkhof

Ephesians 1:11b (NASB) "...having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will."

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

Romans 8:28-29 (NASB) "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren."

1 Corinthians 10:11 (NASB) "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."

I. The Hard Life of Disobedience (vv. 1-5)

Judges 21:25 (NASB) "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

Leviticus 26:3-4 (NASB) "If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, 4 then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit."

"When we have trials in our lives, we always have three choices: *We can endure our trials...* but when we merely endure our troubles, we run the risk of becoming bitter. *We can just escape.* Run! Leave! Get out of there! When we do that, we get away from where we are. But if God hasn't told us to leave, we leave the place where God can help us. *We can enlist our troubles.* This is the right thing to do. In other words, we can let God use the crisis in our lives to make us better, help us grow in His way. *We can step up on our trouble and move it to a higher level.*"
—David Jeremiah

II. Naomi's Plan (vv. 6-15)

III. Ruth's Commitment (vv. 16-17)

"Naomi painted the future very dark, and Ruth took her hand and walked into it with her."

— John Piper

Leviticus 26:12 (NASB) "I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people."

1 Thessalonians 1:9 (NASB) "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God."

"Ruth's conversion is evidence of the sovereign grace of God, for the only way sinners can be saved is by grace (Ephesians 2:8-10). Everything within her and around her presented obstacles to her faith, and yet she trusted the God of Israel."
— Warren Wiersbe

IV. Naomi's Homecoming (vv. 18-22)

Ruth 4:15b (NASB) "...for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons..."

Ruth 4:16 (NASB) "Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse."

Psalms 119:67 (NASB) "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word."

Psalms 119:71 (NASB) "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes."

Psalms 119:75 (NASB) "I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me."

Sermon 1: The Amazing Providence of God

Ruth 1:1-22

Today we begin a four or five-part series on the Old Testament book of Ruth. I have entitled the series, *A Surprising Branch on Jesus' Family Tree*. I am speaking of the genealogy of Christ. As we prepare to celebrate His birth, we will set our minds on the book of Ruth. In the very last verses of Ruth, in Ruth 4:21-22 we read, "and to Salmon was born Boaz [Ruth's husband], and to Boaz, Obed, and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David." Ruth, a foreigner, a Moabite woman, was the great grandmother of King David. Remember that one of the titles given to Jesus was "Son [descendent] of David." In the genealogy of both Matthew and Luke, the lineage of Jesus is traced through Ruth, the wife of Boaz. Ruth, a foreigner from the hated Moabites was indeed in Jesus family tree.

Benjamin Franklin served for a time as the American Ambassador to France. It is reported that while in France he occasionally attended the meetings of "The Infidel's Club." This club was a group of intellectuals who spent most of their time together reading and discussing literary

masterpieces. Like many intellectual snobs today, they were mostly atheists or agnostics who ridiculed the Bible. On one occasion Ben Franklin brought a book to read before the group. When he finished the short story, the club members were unanimous in their praise of the book. They demanded to know where he had run across such a literary masterpiece. Franklin gleefully told them that it was the book of Ruth from the Bible which they had scorned, but evidently knew little about. Ben Franklin had simply changed the names in the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth is truly a literary masterpiece that beautifully displays love, devotion, and true romance, but it is also history. Ruth was a real person in history. Her storybook romance and marriage was with a real man named Boaz.

We are told in the very first verse of Ruth that the events of the book took place in the time of the Judges. The period covered in the book of Judges was somewhere around 1375 – 1050 BC. These were the darkest, most wicked days of Israel's history. Ruth is like a beautiful flower growing beside a polluted stream.

The book of Ruth exalts women and their prominent place in God's plan. Those people who think the Bible denigrates or demeans women probably have never read the book of Ruth. David Jeremiah says it well, "Nowhere else in Scripture do we see God's intimate and tender care for women caught in the direst of circumstances, including poverty, widowhood, grief, and homelessness. And nowhere else in the Old Testament do we find a woman of faith and calm assurance more vividly portrayed than in the story of Ruth." [David Jeremiah, *Ruth, Romance, and Redemption*, page 8]

As much as any book in the Bible, the book of Ruth magnifies the providence of God. The English word "providence" comes from a compound Latin word. The first part is *pro* which means before and the second part is *videre* which means to see. The word means to see beforehand, but when it is used of God, providence means much more than God's foreknowledge. It includes God's action – the working out of His sovereign plan. In other words, God not only watches the future, He watches *over* the future. Let me give you a definition of providence by theologian Louis Berkhof: "Providence is that work of God in which He preserves all His creatures, is active in all that happens in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end." [Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, page 39]

I would describe God's providence as the outworking of God's sovereignty in His preserving, governing, and working through circumstances and man's decisions to bring about His determined purposes. Ephesians 1:11b: "...having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will." That working "all things after the counsel of His will" is the providence of God.

Throughout this book of Ruth, we are going to see the providential working of God – through "untimely deaths," through "chance" meetings, through hopelessness, and even through decisions that were not according to God's perfect will. The providential working of God is indeed amazing. I love that verse by William Cowper in the poem that was put to music, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*:

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

The book of Ruth is very, very encouraging to believers today. This short little book is an illustration, an example of the New Testament principle found in Romans 8:28-29: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many

brethren.” From the book of Ruth, we will see the working out of God’s purposes in spite of sin, failure, and times that seem hopeless. You will be encouraged if you will be here and learn the principles taught and demonstrated in the book of Ruth. If you feel like you are mostly an insignificant person in an insignificant place doing mostly insignificant things, you will find great encouragement in the book of Ruth. You can’t get more insignificant in the world’s eyes than was Ruth. This “insignificant woman” in an “insignificant place” doing (from the world’s view) “insignificant things” has a book of the Bible named for her and became an ancestor of the Savior, the very Son of God!

My end goal for myself and for each of you is that we behold our God from a whole new perspective and also that we behold our failures, our disappointments, and our not getting many “breaks” in life from a whole new perspective. You may be insignificant from the world’s viewpoint; you may have never made anyone’s list of the “top” whatever, but you are not insignificant to God – the God who created all that is and created you that you might have the amazing honor of glorifying Him in all that you do, say, and even think. Until we understand the truth that God is always providentially working in, around and through us we will miss the joy, the adventure, the fulfillment of walking in communion and fellowship with Him.

Before we delve into the text, remember this truth about the Old Testament: 1 Corinthians 10:11: “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

I. The Hard Life of Disobedience (vv. 1-5)

That phrase “the days when the judges governed” refers to the time between Israel settling in the Promised Land after coming out of slavery in Egypt until the first King (Saul) was installed. The days of the judges were the darkest days in Israel’s history. The last verse of the book of Judges summarizes these mostly shameful days. Judges 21:25: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” This was a time of spiritual confusion, a time of turning away from the Lord, and a time of moral madness (does that remind you of any other time?). In spite of the spiritual darkness, we will see clearly that God was at work just as He is in our time of moral madness.

A man named Elimelech who lived in Bethlehem made a disastrous decision concerning himself and his family. There was a famine in Israel. It is interesting that the word “Bethlehem” means “house of bread” and there was no bread in the house of bread! God, throughout the Old Testament times, sent famines often to discipline His people. Going back to the Cowper poem I quoted earlier, famine was “a frowning providence.” For God’s Old Covenant people, rain or the lack thereof was often tied in to the obedience of His people. An example is Leviticus 26:3-4: “If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit.” God controls the rain. The lack of rain was God’s discipline of His covenant people. Instead of repenting and staying where God put them and trusting Him to provide, Elimelech followed reports that there was bread in Moab. Make no mistake about it; Elimelech’s decision to go to Moab put him in rebellion against God.

David Jeremiah has a good word concerning how we respond to trials.

When we have trials in our lives, we always have three choices: *We can endure our trials...* but when we merely endure our troubles, we run the risk of becoming bitter. *We can just escape.* Run! Leave! Get out of there! When we do that, we get away from where we are. But if God hasn’t told us to leave, we leave the place

where God can help us. *We can enlist our troubles.* This is the right thing to do. In other words, we can let God use the crisis in our lives to make us better, help us grow in His way. We can step up on our trouble and move it to a higher level. [David Jeremiah, *Ruth, Romance, and Redemption*, pages 22-23]

It is obvious that Elimelech took the “escape” option. As a result of choosing his own “wisdom” over God’s, there was disaster. It seems that their little trip to Moab, for what I’m sure they thought would be a short time, turned into about ten years.

Moab was not a “God friendly” place. It did not have a good beginning. The people traced their lineage back to a man named Moab. He was conceived in incest by Lot’s daughter. They were perpetual enemies of the Jews. Let me introduce you to the pagan gods and religious practices of the Moabites. The most feared of their gods was Chemosh or more commonly called Moloch. Moloch was worshipped through child sacrifice. When disaster threatened Moab, the pagan priests would call for another sacrifice. The priests would go through the homes to find the next child to sacrifice. Some of the goddesses were worshipped through immoral acts with harlot priestesses in their temple. This is the kind of place that Elimelech took his family to escape the famine. Instead of turning back to God, he turned his back on God and took them to this pagan place. The two boys, predictably, marry Moabite women.

In verse 5 we see that Elimelech exchanged a famine for three funerals. Verse 5 tells us that Elimelech and both of his sons died in Moab. Now there are three widows. Naomi was left with no husband, no sons, and only had two Moabite daughters in law.

II. Naomi’s Plan (vv. 6-15)

Naomi had gotten word that the famine was over in Bethlehem and so her plan was to send her daughters in law back to their Moabite families while she took the fifty-mile trek back to Bethlehem by herself. The word translated “return” in verse 6 implies that there was repentance on Naomi’s part. She doubtlessly confessed the lack of trust in coming to Moab and now, in repentance she starts making the long journey home.

It seems that they had not gone very far when Naomi stopped and talked with her two daughters in law (verses 6-13). Why does the Scripture devote so much space to Naomi trying to get her daughters to go back to their own families and their own Gods? She had no way to care for them. In light of that fact, she encourages them to stay with their families. There was a second reason that is more important. I will introduce something here that becomes very, very important later in the book of Ruth. I am speaking of the custom of the kinsman redeemer. When an Israelite husband died, his brother or near relative was to marry the widow and preserve the brother’s name. This is what Naomi is referring to in Ruth 1:11-13: “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? 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, 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.’” Naomi is so distraught and probably guilt filled that she leaves out the fact that if there is no brother to take the widow or the brother refuses to take the widow, another relative could take the widow and raise up a child in the name of her husband.

In response to Naomi’s appeal to leave her and go back, Orpah chose to go back into her life of paganism and false religion. She seems to have cared about Naomi, but the pull of family and

familiarities drew her back to her pagan roots. Naomi then turns to Ruth, her other daughter in law, and extorts her one more time to go back to her own people.

III. Ruth's Commitment (vv. 16-17)

Ruth's response is quite amazing. Even though she is still a young woman and the likelihood is that by going with Naomi back to Bethlehem she may never marry and have children. One author put it this way, "Naomi painted the future very dark, and Ruth took her hand and walked into it with her." [John Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*, page 34]

What we have in verse 16 is Ruth's confession of her conversion. She had come to know the true and living God. She desired to be with His people in His land. When God made His covenant with His people, He said in multiple places what we read in Leviticus 26:12: "I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people." Those are the words that God used in committing to save those who were His people. What Ruth is saying in response to Naomi is this: "This God who made a covenant with Abraham, who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, who promised to save them, this is my God!" That is what Ruth is saying to Naomi in verse 16 when she says, "your God [is] my God." The New Testament version of what Ruth is saying is in 1 Thessalonians 1:9: "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God." Without reservation or limitation, Ruth makes this salvation testimony clear and plain.

Warren Wiersbe has some great words about verse 16. "Ruth's conversion is evidence of the sovereign grace of God, for the only way sinners can be saved is by grace (Ephesians 2:8-10). Everything within her and around her presented obstacles to her faith, and yet she trusted the God of Israel." [Warren Wiersbe, *Be Committed*, page 21]

Let me state again that Ruth's testimony in Ruth 1:16-17 is one of the most amazing confessions of faith ever written. Notice in verse 16 how she confesses her love for Naomi by committing to never leave her. She commits herself to care for Naomi and to be her family. In verse 17 she makes sure that her confession is not seen as something temporary and changeable. It is all the way to death! In verse 16, Ruth confesses her faith in the true and living God and her commitment to worship Him alone.

It is interesting how many times verses 16-17 are used in weddings for the bride and groom to express the depth of their commitment to one another. Many couples are surprised when I tell them that these verses are certainly appropriate for a wedding, but they were originally given from a daughter in law to her mother in law! The point that I want you to make sure that you get is that this is a confession of faith from a former idol worshipper.

IV. Naomi's Homecoming (vv. 18-22)

When Naomi left Bethlehem, there was a famine, but now there is a harvest. Bethlehem was a small town and soon the news of Naomi's return spread and the people came out to see her. Ruth chapter 1 opened with a famine beginning and it closes with a harvest beginning. The physical famine corresponded to a time of spiritual famine in Naomi's life. It seems that Naomi is so bitter over all that she has been through that she doesn't yet understand the blessing that Ruth is to her. That will become obvious to her later as even the people of Bethlehem will say of Ruth in Ruth 4:15b: "...for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons..."

Conclusion

When Naomi says in Ruth 1:21b: "... the Almighty has afflicted me?" she has not yet had time to see what God does through affliction in His children. In the latter part of this book, we will see her with Ruth's child in her lap. Ruth 4:16: "Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse." Learn this, we cannot control the circumstances, the trials that come into our life, but we can control, by the Holy Spirit's enabling, how we respond to them. Listen to three verses in Psalm 119 that serve as a good conclusion of how God uses affliction in our lives whether the affliction comes as we walk with God or when we are not walking with Him.

Psalms 119:67: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word."

Psalms 119:71: "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes."

Psalms 119:75: "I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me." Look to Ruth and see the whole picture.