

*A Frowning Providence:* Ruth 1  
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Sunday, January 25, 2009

This morning we're going to begin a short series through the Old Testament book of Ruth. Today we'll look at chapter 1, and I've entitled this sermon, "A Frowning Providence." I take that phrase from a hymn by William Cowper which says, "Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace; behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face." Those words are a great exhortation for us, especially when we find ourselves in difficult times. Are we going to judge the Lord and accuse Him of doing wrong? Or are we going to trust Him for His grace? Are you facing a trial in your life right now? I'm sure many of us are, in various ways and to varying degrees. And the question for each of us is whether we're going to trust in the sovereignty and goodness of God, or are we going to judge Him by our feeble sense. The reason we can trust Him even in the midst of trials is because "behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face." This is a difficult truth to embrace because when we're in the middle of a hardship, we may not clearly see the smiling face. What we see before us is the frowning providence. And we can very easily, because of our sinful flesh and our lack of faith, focus solely on the frowning providence. We may become discouraged and disheartened and spiral downward into self-pity and depression. We lose sight of anything beyond the trial. We lose sight of any ways in which God may be working through this trial for our good and for His glory. We need to constantly remember that "behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face."

This is what we're going to see in the story of Ruth. The first chapter is an account of a frowning providence. Naomi and Ruth experience some horrendous losses. They are faced with some very sad and difficult trials. It seems as though God is frowning on them—bringing calamity upon them. But as the story unfolds it becomes clear that behind that frowning providence God hides a smiling face. The backdrop of this entire story is God's smiling face—His providential plan to bless His people. He richly blesses Naomi and Ruth before this story is through, and most significantly we see how these events fit into the big picture of God's plans to send His own Son into the world.

The story of Ruth is, among other things, a story of God's providence. It is a story of heartache and loss. It is a story of friendship. It is a story of kindness. It is a story of dreams that are shattered and then miraculously fulfilled. But ultimately this little

book is a story of God's sovereignty. To see the aspect of God's sovereignty in this book, and to set the whole story in its appropriate context, I want to begin by reading the end of the book. Then we'll come back and study chapter 1. But I first want us to understand how this story fits into the big picture of God's plans to redeem His people.

At the end of Ruth we find a genealogy. The story culminates in the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, and the birth of a baby boy. Chapter 4:17 reveals the significance of this son, "They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David." Ruth's son, and Naomi's grandson, became the grandfather of King David! And King David pointed forward to the Messiah. In the genealogy of Matthew 1 we find these names again, "Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king" (Matthew 1:5-6). And then it goes on to trace the line all the way to Jesus Christ. So now as we read the heart-wrenching story of Ruth 1, we need to read it with the understanding that this is about God's providential plans to send His Son into the world. This is a story that points to our Savior, Jesus Christ. And it should give us great hope to understand that God ordains events such as these for glorious purposes. Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.

There are two main themes that I want to focus on in this chapter. First, and primarily, I want us to see the providence of God. I want us to see that God is sovereign over nature. He is sovereign over the will of man. He is sovereign over sin and evil and death. And He is sovereign over trials and hardships and loss. God is in control of all these things, and He is working all of it together for His glory and the good of His people. Secondly, later in the chapter, I also want us to think about the nature of faith. We'll look at the amazing statements made by Ruth, and we'll see that faith is yet another example of how God works providentially in the lives of men and women.

### **God's Providence over All Things**

The story begins with a very brief statement that sets these events in their historical context. "In the days when the judges ruled . . ." These were unsettled times for the people of Israel. If you turn back a page and read the last verse in the book of Judges, it says, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The time of the judges was a time of unrest, and this is the context of the book of Ruth. It was a time when there was no king, and there was much turmoil. Adding

to this turmoil, and possibly as a punishment for the Israelite's sin, there was a famine in the land. This, of course, was God's doing. God's providential control includes all natural events. In verse 6 we'll read that God brought an end to the famine, and it was certainly God who ordained the onset of the famine as well.

At this point the narrator introduces us to a particular family. They were from Bethlehem in Judah. Ironically, Bethlehem—which means “house of bread”—had no bread. Because of the famine this family left Bethlehem and sojourned in the country of Moab. Their names were Elimelech and Naomi, and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion. As we continue to think about God's providence in this story, think about Elimelech's decision to take his family to Moab. It was certainly true that Elimelech made the decision. He went willingly to Moab. He was not forced to do so. And what's amazing to consider is the fact that God is sovereign over every decision that we make. This does not mean that we're robots. Elimelech was not a puppet on a string simply being pulled along in God's story. He had a desire to do something, and he determined in his will to do it, and he was responsible for the actions he took. And at the same time, God ordained his decision, and all of our decisions. Isn't that a wonderful and mysterious truth? I hope you're not discouraged by these biblical truths just because we can't fully understand them. Instead, I hope these things will cause us to marvel at God's greatness and power and beauty. If you want a god whom you can fully understand, then you'll have to worship a false god. Because the true God is incomprehensible. He is infinite, and we are finite. Therefore we must affirm what God's Word affirms, even when we can't get our minds around all the complexities and mysteries of what it says. The Bible affirms, and we must affirm, that we make real decisions for which we are held responsible, and also that God is in complete control of every decision that we make. It was God's plan that Ruth, the Moabite, would be part of Jesus' genealogy. And part of bringing that plan about was directing Elimelech's heart such that he decided to move his family to Moab.

These questions become even more complex when we realize that the decision to move to Moab was very likely a sinful one. The text doesn't clearly state if this was a sinful act, but it is true that Elimelech was leading his family out of the Promised Land to dwell in the foreign country of Moab. And there were concerns about Moab, which apparently Elimelech ignored or reasoned away. In Numbers 22-24 there's the story of Moab not wanting Israel to pass through their land, and so Balak the king of

Moab called for Balaam to come and pronounce curses upon Israel, which God did not allow to happen. But for this reason, it says in Deuteronomy 23 that Moabites were not allowed to enter the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation. Also, in Numbers 25 we read that the Israelites “began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.” And then in the book of Judges we also see that Israel was oppressed by Eglon the king of Moab for eighteen years (Judges 3).

Elimelech was leading his family to a very questionable place. There was a history of animosity between Israel and Moab, and also a history of unfaithfulness and idolatry. Whether Elimelech’s death is a punishment for his actions, we’re not told. But, indeed, this family falls on hard times in Moab. First Elimelech dies. Then Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite women, which should not have been done. The Israelites were not to intermarry with those who worshipped other gods (see Deuteronomy 7, although Moab is not specifically mentioned). And, again, while the narrative does not explicitly denounce this action, we are told that both of these men died after ten years, and they left Ruth and Orpah without any children.

This is a sad story so far. It is a frowning providence that has orchestrated the events of this family. Their own sin is involved in these events, and quite possibly the trials they face are the Lord’s chastisement for their disobedience. That might be a scary thought to you, but when we consider it in the context of this book, it makes the story all the more amazing. Remember that behind this frowning providence, God is hiding a smiling face. And the providential hand of God in this story superintends even the sinful actions of His people. That is an amazing truth! Even as we stumble through life and make a mess of so many things, God will use even the sinful actions of our lives to glorify Himself and bless His people. This doesn’t mean that we’re not responsible for our sin, and we can’t use this truth to justify any sin. But as we look back on the many sins in our lives, and the difficult consequences that resulted from those sins, we can rejoice that God is using even those things, somehow, for good.

Verses 1-5 have given us a rapid fire account of these sad events in the life of Naomi. Beginning in verse 6, the narrative slows down considerably to give us a more detailed account of what happens from here on. It is God’s grace that in the midst of Naomi’s heartache, she is able to hear some good news. Finally the famine has ended. Verse 6 says, “the Lord had visited his

people and given them food (or bread).” The word there for food / bread is *lehem*, which is part of the city name *Bethlehem*. The house of bread had been empty, but now it is full again. And this news compels Naomi to return to her homeland. Her two daughters-in-law accompany her, but at some point along the way she tries to convince them to go back to Moab and remarry. These words of Naomi are recorded in verses 8-9, “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. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” When Naomi pronounces the blessing upon them and says, “May the Lord deal kindly with you,” first we should notice that she uses the word *Yahweh*—the personal name for Israel’s God, the one true God. She doesn’t use the general name for God, and she certainly doesn’t refer to Moab’s god, *Chemosh*. She prays that *Yahweh* would deal kindly with them. And then we should also see that the word behind that phrase “deal kindly” is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is hard to express in a single English word. It refers to covenant faithfulness, compassion, love, mercy, kindness. And it is Naomi’s desire that *Yahweh* would demonstrate His *hesed* toward these two daughters-in-law, for they have shown kindness to Naomi and her family.

This makes it somewhat confusing, though, why Naomi would send them back to Moab where *Yahweh* was not worshiped. If it was really her desire that her daughters-in-law experience the loving-kindness of *Yahweh*, wouldn’t she want them to join her in returning to Bethlehem where they could live among the Lord’s chosen people? I think this shows what a desperate situation this was. If Elimelech and Mahlon and Chilion were still alive, and the famine ended, maybe they would have all returned joyfully to Bethlehem. But Naomi now finds herself in a very difficult and vulnerable position. She is without a husband and without sons, which meant that she had no one to care for her, no one to provide for her. Naomi didn’t know how she was going to put food on the table for herself, much less for her two daughters-in-law. These are desperate times for this family, and Naomi is thinking of survival. And she assumes that for Ruth and Orpah, under the circumstances, it makes the best sense for them to return to Moab and remarry.

At the end of verse 9 Naomi kisses them, and they weep together. And we expect them then to follow Naomi’s instructions and depart. But in verse 10 they insist, “No, we will return with you to your people.” This is really remarkable, even for Orpah who ends up returning to Moab. It is remarkable that these two

young women had developed such a bond with their mother-in-law. Hardship and loss can knit hearts together in a very unique way, and I think that's what we're seeing here. Each of these women had lost their husband. They grieved with one another. They relied on one another. And through those trials their lives were bonded together in a very profound way.

Naomi seeks to deter them again in verses 11-13. Three times in these verses she tenderly calls them "my daughters." But she insists that they not follow her back to Israel, but return to their homeland. The reason she cites is that she is unable to provide husbands for them. It's a reference to levirate marriage. We get that term from the Latin word, *levir*, which means brother-in-law, and it refers to a custom in biblical times that when a husband died and left a widow without any children, it was the responsibility of the brother-in-law to marry the widow and produce offspring for the deceased husband—to raise up an heir for him. This is discussed in Deuteronomy 25, and you may also remember the question that the Sadducees asked Jesus in Matthew 22 that had to do with levirate marriage.

Naomi is basically saying to her two daughters-in-law that there aren't any more brothers, and there's no prospect of there being any more brothers. And, therefore, it would be foolish for you to go with me back to Israel. I'm too old to have a husband, she says. And even if I had a husband this night, and had sons, it would be absurd for you to wait around until they were old enough to marry. That's the argument of verses 12-13, Naomi's rationale for why Ruth and Orpah must return to Moab.

But the scope of Naomi's imagination is very limited and pessimistic, which is how we all tend to be in the hard times. She is assuming that the only hope for Ruth and Orpah to find a husband is if Naomi, herself, bore more sons. She has forgotten about Boaz, and is not even considering the possibility that there might be other relatives of Elimelech who could marry her daughters-in-law. Her pessimism is much more explicit in the second half of verse 13. She tells them, "No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." This attitude emerges again in verse 20, when Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem and Naomi says, "Do not call me Naomi [which means pleasant]; call me Mara [which means bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me." Naomi certainly has a

firm grasp on the fact that the Lord is sovereign over all things. She knows that it is the Lord who has brought about all of these events: the famine, her family's relocation to Moab, the death of her husband, the death of her sons, the barrenness of her daughters-in-law. All of this is from the Lord's hand. What Naomi does not understand is the Lord's goodness. Naomi does not understand that God ordains all things, and even trials in the lives of His people, for *good* purposes. God is not only sovereign, He is also good. Naomi can only see half of that equation. In the agony of her own heartache, she feels that these acts of God's providence are evidence that He is against her. The Lord Almighty is plotting to destroy her. He wants to make her life miserable.

Have you ever felt that way? Even if you know in your head that it's not true, have you felt at times like God is inflicting you with various hardships because He is against you? My hope as we study this book together is that you will be assured, once again, that "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). If you are in Christ—if your sins are forgiven through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—then every hardship, every trial, every sickness, every loss, is brought into your life by God Almighty, who is not only sovereign but good. By chapter four in the book of Ruth, Naomi will see the beauty of God's plans. But the crisis of faith occurs here in chapter one. And it's the same with us. When a trial hits, and we can't see the end of the story—we can't see the big picture of what God is doing—that's when we're faced with the question of whether we're going to trust in God's goodness or assume that the Lord is against us.

### **The Nature of Faith**

We've seen God's providence in this story, and we'll continue to see that in the following chapters. The other thing I want us to consider in this chapter is the nature of faith. What I think we see in the next verses is a picture of faith. And this fits right into the theme of God's providence in this book, because it's God's plan that Ruth would accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem, and so He puts it in Ruth's heart to want to follow Naomi and to become part of Naomi's people and to worship Naomi's God.

In verse 14 they weep again together, and then the pivotal moment comes. What will these two women do? Up to this point, their actions have been the same. They both followed Naomi, and after Naomi's first attempt to dissuade them they both insisted on

returning with her to her people. But now they separate. Orpah kisses Naomi, bidding her farewell. But Ruth clings to her.

Naomi tries one last time to convince Ruth to go back to Moab. Verse 15, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” This is a short statement, but it sheds a lot of light on what Ruth is about to say. Because Naomi recognizes that a return to Moab means a return to the gods of Maob—Chemosh and others. Orpah was going home, not only to her people, but to the false religion they embraced.

Ruth, on the other hand, was determined to stay with Naomi and to worship the God of Israel. This is a beautiful speech in verses 16-17. “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” What an amazing commitment Ruth is making here, and what a moving statement of that commitment! She is pledging to separate herself from her own people in order to become part of Naomi’s people. She states that the Israelites will be her people, and Yahweh will be her God. In the last statement she makes an oath and, in effect, calls down a curse upon herself if she does not uphold these commitments. And in that statement, “may the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you,” she uses the personal name for Israel’s God (Yahweh), which sounds odd coming from the lips of a Moabite, a worshipper of Chemosh.

It’s hard to know exactly what Ruth understood of Yahweh at this point, but God is certainly doing something amazing in her heart to give her such resolve and determination to bind herself to Naomi and Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God. Ruth may have learned much about Yahweh during her years of marriage to Mahlon, but we can only speculate as to the extent of what she learned or the accuracy of what she was taught. Based on Naomi’s statements about the Lord that we’ve looked at, Ruth may have been given a somewhat distorted picture of God’s nature. But whatever she understood, or didn’t understand, Ruth was compelled to commit herself to this woman Naomi, to the people of Israel, and to this God—Yahweh. Leon Morris says, “Her trust may not have been well informed, but it was real” (*Ruth*, Tyndale OT Commentaries, pg. 260). And from this picture we can learn some profound things about the nature of faith.

Understanding these events in the larger picture of God's providence, I think we see here a picture of irresistible grace. Ruth had every reason, humanly speaking, to go back to Moab. In the eyes of the world, it was Orpah who made the prudent decision. What Ruth did was sheer insanity. And yet she was irresistibly drawn to Naomi, and Israel, and Yahweh. She couldn't explain it, but even in the face of opposition (from Naomi!), Ruth had within her a compelling desire to go. It was inexplicable from an earthly perspective, but God was at work to accomplish His will in Ruth's life. As we look at Ruth and Orpah we see that God chooses some and not others. Orpah went back to Moab and its gods, but Ruth was chosen, not because of anything good that she had done, but simply because God was pleased to pour out His grace upon her. For those of us who are saved, we should be amazed afresh that God chose to save us.

It has been said of the two thieves who died on either side of Jesus Christ: "One thief was saved so that all might have hope, but only one so that none would presume." God does not choose to save everyone, and therefore we must not presume that we deserved to be saved. We must not take our salvation for granted. We should be utterly amazed that God choose to pour out His grace in our lives and irresistibly draw us to Himself. It is the wonder of all wonders that the Almighty and Holy God sent His own Son to this earth to die for sinners, so that He might redeem a people for Himself. God has chosen to save many, and that should give us all hope. If you're here this morning and you're not a believer, you should be encouraged that God is a God who saves. He is mighty to save the worst of sinners, those who are least deserving, those who are prideful and arrogant, those who do not believe in Him, those who have committed the vilest of crimes. No matter what you've done, God can work in your heart to bring you to repent of your sins and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

As I think about many of your testimonies, many of which I've been able to hear recently in membership interviews, I think about how, for many of you, there is no human explanation for why you're a Christian. Some of you had little or no Christian influences in your life as you grew up, or you had mainly negative Christian influences. You are like Ruth who had every earthly reason to go to Moab, and yet God worked sovereignly and irresistibly in your life to draw you to Him. He changed your heart. He changed your desires. And the world calls you foolish for the course you've taken in life, but you know that nothing would bring you greater joy than clinging to your Lord and Savior

Jesus Christ. In the face of opposition, against all worldly odds, you are committed to following Him, because He has chosen to make you one of His own. Praise Him today for His providence, and for His sovereign plan in bringing you to faith. And praise Him that He is sovereign over all things, and is using even the trials in your life right now, for His good and our good. Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.