

## Ruth & the Providential Hand of God:

*God's Hand in Our Suffering* (Ruth 1)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on October 14, 2012

### Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're beginning a four-part series on the book of Ruth. If you've never read it, I urge you to set aside time this week and read the whole thing in one sitting. It is only four chapters, and the plot moves quickly. Do it and you'll see why this is such a beloved story.
  - ▶ From a literary standpoint, Ruth is a classic love story. From a historical standpoint, it gives us the ancestry of David, ancient Israel's greatest king. The book concludes with his genealogy, which helps set this short story into the larger context of the Bible and the larger story it tells.
  
- ❖ But beyond the literary and historical perspectives, Ruth is a book of theology. And the primary theological theme highlighted is the providence of God. **Ruth is a book about providence. Its purpose is to show how God is totally in control of all human events, whether good or bad (happy or sad), and usually in ways unperceived by man.**
  - ▶ That's what 'providence' means. I realize it's not a common word anymore. It's fallen out of usage largely due to the fact that it's a religious term that only makes sense in a theistic worldview.
  
- ❖ And so in our day and age, dominated by a secular worldview, you'll hear people use words like fate, fortune, destiny, or luck in order to explain why things happen. *Why did that good thing happen to you?* Call it luck. *What about that bad thing?* That's just fate. The idea is that these blind forces are working behind the scenes in all the circumstances of our lives.
  - ▶ But providence is different. **It says that behind the scenes is no blind force but an all-seeing, personal God.** And he's not just a cosmic spectator. **Providence implies that God is actively sustaining and governing all things in the world.**
  
- ❖ Like the song says, "*He's got the whole world in His hands.*" That's providence. Our providential God makes the rain to fall, the sun to shine, and the stars to twinkle. His hand directs all events in human history from the rise and fall of nations to the roll of a dice, from the death of a sparrow to the day of your own death. **Nothing just happens by chance. Nothing is attributable to mere fate. Everything is guided by God's providential hand.**

### In the Crucible of Suffering

- ❖ Now many of us grew up believing this. Maybe you didn't call it providence. You probably called it your belief in God's sovereignty. Regardless, you share this conviction. **But all it takes is for personal tragedy to strike and then you find out if your conviction is deeply rooted or merely superficial.**
  
- ❖ On April 20, 2001, Jim and Veronica Bowers, along with their six-year-old son Cory and seven-month-old daughter Charity were flying in a single-engine Cessna floatplane over the jungles of Peru where they served as missionaries. The Peruvian Air Force mistook them for a drug running plane and opened fire. Bullets ripped through the plane. The pilot's legs were shot yet he somehow managed to safely land the damaged plane on a river.

- ▶ Jim Bowers was shaken but alive along with his son Cory. But he turned and found his wife dead along with their infant daughter sitting on her lap. Killed by a single bullet that passed through Veronica's back and stopped inside Charity.
- ❖ And the question is: *Where was providence? Was providence working in that situation? Do I really believe God had a providential hand in that horrific tragedy?* Now we'll come back to this story, but right now I just want us to feel the tension.
  - ▶ **There is theology done in the clouds, but then there is theology done on the ground in the crucible of suffering.** So right now you might believe in providence in the abstract, but will you still believe when you're in the crucible of suffering?
    - Friends, I want to prepare you, to help deepen your convictions about God and His providence *before* tragedy strikes. I realize for some it already has.
- ❖ The truth about providence found in this book is what you need to hear. It can sustain you through the crucible, through the heat and pressure of personal tragedy and suffering.
  - ▶ And we'll get at that truth by contrasting the rudimentary theologies of our principle female characters, Naomi and Ruth. We'll consider 1) Naomi's right theology, 2) Naomi's wrong theology, and 3) Ruth's balanced theology.

### It Was the Worst of Times

- ❖ But let's first set the scene by reading vv1-5. *"In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 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. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband."*
- ❖ The main character in chapter one is a Hebrew woman named Naomi whose name means "pleasant or sweet", but in the first five verses her life turns very bitter. In fact the first few words already signal trouble, *"In the days when the judges ruled"*.
  - ▶ To an ancient Jew, those words were ominous. They set a dark, troubling scene for the rest of the story. They accomplish the same as Dickens' famous first line, *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."* But in this case it was just the worst of times.
- ❖ Those were dark days in Israel's past. If you read the book of Judges, you'll be shocked to read about idolatry, murder, child sacrifice, prostitution, etc. The last verse of Judges paints a picture of how dark the days were. *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* (21:25)

- ❖ Now according to worldly wisdom, doing whatever is right in your own eyes is good advice. “*Do what you think is right. Just follow your heart.*” That’s what the world tells you.
  - ▶ **But the Bible says doing whatever is right in your own eyes is never a good thing. Instead, the Bible says what we need is a good king to rule over us** – one who rescues us, defends us, and teaches us to walk in paths of true righteousness. But there was no king in those days. This was a dark, dark time for the people of God.
  
- ❖ Now we’re also told there was a famine in the land, which led a man to move his family away from the Promised Land to Moab. Remember, the Israelites and Moabites were bitter enemies. And Moabites worshipped false gods who demanded things like child sacrifice. **These were not friendly, godly neighbors. Yet apparently it was right in Elimelech’s eyes to take his family to sojourn there.**
  - ▶ Then tragic irony strikes. He brought his family to Moab to live and yet he dies. But all is not lost. Naomi still has two sons who marry Moabite women, so there is a chance for grandchildren to perpetuate the family line. But ten years go by and neither couple is able to conceive. **There was famine in the land and in the womb.**
  
- ❖ And then the final blow. Her sons die and crush any hope she had left for the family. Picture Naomi standing over their graves. And the questions start to fly. *Why did this happen to her? Who or what is responsible? Was this a coincidence or a consequence? And where was God? Where was His hand of providence?* If you're gripped by these questions at this point in the story, then you're right where the author wants you. So now let’s see how Naomi responds.

### Naomi’s Right Theology

- ❖ Let’s consider what I’m calling Naomi’s right theology. Fast forward to v20. This is after the townswomen are surprised she’s back and not sure if it’s really her. Her entire demeanor has changed. “<sup>20</sup>*She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara (bitter), for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. <sup>21</sup>I went away full, and the LORD (YAHWEH) has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”*”
  
- ❖ Her theology comes across clear. Whose hand does she see working in her suffering? God’s. Yahweh’s. “*The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.*” (v20) “[Yahweh] *has brought me back empty . . . the Almighty has brought calamity upon me.*” (v21)
  - ▶ She doesn’t believe in fate or fortune. **She believes in providence – that God’s providential hand governs all things – even bad things.**
  
- ❖ The question is “*Do you agree?*” Now I do think there is something wrong with her theology and we’ll get to that in a minute, but on this point – on the basic idea of providence – do you agree? Do you think God’s hand is involved in all human events even tragic ones?
  - ▶ I’m not sure that sits right with a lot of Christians, much less non-Christians. **I’m sure no one has a problem with the idea that all good things come from God’s hand, but many will resist the idea that painful things come from the same hand.**

- But here is Naomi making that very claim. I can hear someone object, “*Well she might feel that way but it doesn't mean she's right.*” The narrative records her thoughts, but it doesn't necessarily endorse them.
- ❖ That's a valid point. Let me draw your attention to the story of Job. Turn to **Job 1**. If you're familiar with his story, you know Job experienced pain and suffering on the same level as Naomi. Everything he loved was stripped away. His world was falling apart.
    - ▶ And how does Job respond? Does he say, “*The LORD gave and the devil has taken away*”? No, look in v21, “*The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away.*” Now again you could argue that he might feel that way but it doesn't mean he's right. Look at v22, “*In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.*”
      - Or look at 2:10. He rebukes his wife by saying, “*Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?*” And the narrator explains, “*In all this Job did not sin with his lips.*”
  - ❖ **So apparently it's not sin – it's not blasphemy – to say that God takes away good things and gives you evil things.** Likewise it was not wrong for Naomi to say the LORD brought her back empty. That part of her theology was right. God did have a hand in her suffering.
    - ▶ But remember, according to Job 1:22, that's not the same as charging God with wrong. *How is that? **How can God have a hand in suffering and yet be blameless?***
  - ❖ This is where we can't forget that conversation between God and Satan in the beginning of Job. There we learn that Satan brought all this up. He was convinced Job only worshipped God because of all the good gifts His hand had provided. “*Take them away and Job will curse you,*” Satan said. So God permits him to do his worst. He just can't kill the man.
    - ▶ Think about that: Satan needed permission to harm Job. That means he devised the harm. It originated from the devil's hand or the hand of man YET harm will not come to pass unless God allows it to pass through His hand.
      - **In other words, not everything originates from God's hand yet all things must pass through it before it comes to pass.** In the ultimate sense, suffering comes from God's hand but not in a way that makes him the author of it.
  - ❖ That idea is central to understanding the biblical concept of providence. As well as **the concept of concurrence**. The word means “*to run or flow together*” like two currents flowing concurrently in one river. **The basic idea is that God is able to work His hand in all things without forcing human hands against our will and without excusing human hands from our responsibility.**
    - ▶ The story of Joseph and his brothers is the best example of concurrence. If you recall, his brothers were guilty of treachery, but Joseph recognized the hand of God working through them. So he says to them in **Genesis 50:20**, “*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.*”

- ❖ There were many currents of human intent and action involved in Joseph's story. The current of his brothers' evil intent. The current of the slave traders's actions. The current of Potiphar's wife's deception. The current of Pharaoh's decision. But not once did God violate human freedom and force someone to act against their will. Rather all these currents flowed seamlessly together in the river of God's providence.
- ❖ *What does all this mean? This means you can find comfort in knowing that the life circumstances that are causing you so much pain are not at the whim of blind, impersonal forces like fate.*
  - ▶ Find comfort in knowing the devil can rage against you, but he's still only a pawn in God's plans. Luther called him a mad dog on a leash – a leash in the hand of God.
    - Find comfort in knowing that all the events of your life are flowing together in one direction guided by a providential hand.

### Naomi's Wrong Theology

- ❖ Now Naomi gets all that. She believes in God's providence, but the problem is that it tastes so bitter to her that it has altered her view of God giving her a wrong theology.
  - ▶ **She still believes God is great but she's not sure if He's as good as she once thought.** She's not accusing Him of authoring evil. She's not doubting His goodness in general. Just notice how in v8 she invokes Yahweh's kindness on Orpah and Ruth. *"May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me."*
    - **So she still believes God deals kindly with people – just not with her.** God is still great and very good towards people – just not me.
- ❖ That's one way Christians react when suffering touches their lives. Now there are other ways. Some would go so far as to reject the idea of not only God's providence but God Himself. They walk away from the faith and resign themselves to fate.
  - ▶ Others would still maintain a belief in God but reject the idea of His absolute sovereignty. For them, the only explanation for why God would allow suffering is that He couldn't stop it for whatever reason. God is not as great as we once thought.
    - But others (and this is where I fear many of us are susceptible) will follow the path of Naomi. **We won't deny God's sovereignty or His providence. But we're not sure anymore if it's a good providence.** His plans might be good towards others – but they don't seem good towards me.
- ❖ Look at v11. Here Naomi is urging her daughter-in-laws to return to their families and find new husbands. *"<sup>11</sup>Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? .... <sup>13</sup>would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of [Yahweh] has gone out against me."*
  - ▶ Do you hear that? "Yahweh is not for me. He's against me. I pray He'll deal kindly with you, but the LORD has it in for me. So why do you want to stick around? Why do you want to be collateral damage?" That's what Naomi is trying to say.

- ❖ Now Orpah concedes to her argument and kisses goodbye, but Ruth clings on. So Naomi tries one more time to convince her to go. *“<sup>15</sup>And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”*”
  - ▶ Listen to her. She’s actually advising Ruth to return to her people *and her gods!* She thinks perhaps Ruth will fare better under the care of Moabite gods since Yahweh has clearly let her down so badly.
  
- ❖ Now listen to her in v21. *“Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”*
  - ▶ She says Yahweh has *“testified against me”*. That’s judicial language. She sees her misfortune as God’s judgment against her family’s unfaithfulness to the OT covenant. Her husband decided to move to Moab. Her sons decided to marry Moabite women. These were violations of the covenant. They got what was coming, and now she thinks she's suffering for her complicity.
    - Look, the narrator doesn’t tell us if she’s right – if the deaths of her husband and sons were direct punishments for covenant-breaking. But it’s clear she certainly felt that way.
  
- ❖ Naomi believed in providence but it was a bitter providence. She couldn't see how God could be both sovereign over her pain and yet still be good and kindly towards her. She looked at her dire circumstances and concluded that God is not for her but against her.
  - ▶ But here is the irony: **Here she is accusing God of testifying against her, while she, in fact, is testifying against Him. She is putting the LORD on trial in the court of Naomi.** She is the prosecution, judge, and jury. The evidence: her circumstances. *And the verdict?* The verdict, based on her circumstances, is that God doesn’t love her.
  
- ❖ *Do you see where she’s gone wrong? She is measuring God’s love and God’s goodness by her circumstances.* She’s saying, *“My circumstances interpret my theology.”* Instead of the other way around where my theology interprets my circumstances.
  - ▶ As one commentator puts it, *“She was ruled by her circumstances instead of the Lord of her circumstances.”*<sup>1</sup> She listened to her suffering to determine her view of God. Instead of listening to God, as He has revealed Himself, to determine how she should view her suffering.
  
- ❖ And there are two unchanging truths that God has revealed about Himself through His words in Scripture and His actions in history. **1) He is sovereign (great). 2) He is good.**
  - ▶ **Psalm 62:11-12**, *“Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Ulrich, *From Famine to Fullness: The Gospel According to Ruth*, 31.

- ❖ **By keeping these two truths in balance you will do well in the face of suffering. But if you sacrifice one or the other, then you make the same mistake as Naomi.** And you end up in her shoes. Resigned to bitterness and self-pity and blinded to the clear evidence of God's goodness in your life.
  - ▶ Notice how Naomi complains about how the LORD brought her back empty, but she is blind to God's goodness by her side in the person of Ruth. He didn't leave her empty. And He hasn't left you empty. But the more bitter we grow, the blinder we get to all the goodness in our lives.

### **Ruth's Balanced Theology**

- ❖ That's why we need a balanced theology, especially *before* tragedy strikes. **We need a balanced view that sees God's providential hand as both great and good because that's what He has revealed about Himself.**
  - ▶ And the one character who embodies this balance is Ruth. Remember her circumstances are similar to Naomi. She lost her husband as well. The prospect of a son looks just as dim. And yet Ruth's response to suffering is different.
- ❖ Look back at v8. It's clear both Orpah and Ruth loved their mother-in-law, and that's why it took three heartfelt pleas to "*turn back*" before Orpah came to her senses. She did what most of us would probably do. She choose the sensible path.
  - ▶ But Ruth took a big risk. **She was rejecting her people, her traditions, her gods and clinging to a bitter old woman as a stranger in a strange land.** She was walking by faith and not by sight.
- ❖ Listen to her in v16, <sup>16</sup>*"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. <sup>17</sup>Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May [Yahweh] do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."* <sup>18</sup>*And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more."*
- ❖ Remember this Moabite did not grow up knowing Yahweh. All she knew of Him came from her deceased husband and mother-in-law, and neither seem to be strong disciples of the faith. Yet over ten years, she must have learned of Yahweh's promise to deliver his people from slavery and bring them into a Promised Land. She must have heard about how Yahweh fought their battles and defeated their enemies. And she heard of how Yahweh recently visited His people and gave them food.
  - ▶ **My point is her understanding was limited but she understood enough to know that God is great and God is good and He keeps His promises.** So right there on the road to Bethlehem she is converted.

- ❖ In v16 she literally says, “*your people, my people, your God, my God.*” That’s her profession of faith. She doesn’t claim to understand God’s providential hand – why He made her a widow, why He closed her womb. **But she is willing to trust Him in the pain. She clings on to two simple truths: God is great. God is good.**
  
- ❖ These two truths are what sustained Jim Bowers in his pain. At his wife and daughter’s funeral only a week later, he stood in front of twelve hundred people and said this, “*Most of all I want to thank my God. He's a sovereign God. I'm finding that out more now. . . . Could this really be God's plan for Roni and Charity; God's plan for Cory and me and our family? I'd like to tell you why I believe so, why I'm coming to believe so.*”
  - ▶ And then he went on and gave a list of 15 reasons and then said, “*Roni and Charity were instantly killed by the same bullet. And it didn't reach Kevin [the pilot] who was right in front of Charity; it stayed in Charity. That was a sovereign bullet. . . . These people who did that simply were used by God. Whether you want to believe it or not. I believe it. They were used by Him, by God, to accomplish His purpose in this, maybe similar to the Roman soldiers whom God used to put Christ on the cross.*”
  
- ❖ Now what did he mean by referencing God using soldiers to put Christ on the cross? Bowers was pointing to the greatest and clearest example of God’s sweet providence working in and through the bitterest of circumstances.
  - ▶ **The crucifixion of Christ was a bitter evil perpetrated by the hands of sinful man. And yet it was God's providential hand that designed it all to save a people from their sins.** From this side of the resurrection, the horrific tragedy of the cross make perfect sense. Providence looks sweet. But at that moment, at the foot of the cross, the eyes of faith were especially dim.
  
- ❖ And that’s where many of us are. **We’re in the moment of suffering. We don’t have the luxury of hindsight. And like Ruth, we’re not sure what God's providential hand is doing and where it's leading.** No one can tell to you why the tragedy happen, why the diagnosis came back as cancer, why your child left the faith, why you can't get pregnant, or why you can't seem to find Mr/Mrs Right. You may never know *why* on this side of heaven.
  - ▶ But as Spurgeon once said, “***When you can't trace God's hand, you can still trust His heart.***” When you can't understand what His hand is doing in your pain, you can trust what you do know about His great and good heart. And the clearest proof of God’s greatness and goodness is found in what He did for us in Jesus.
  
- ❖ This is walking by faith. This is the fight of faith – clinging to the promises of God. Trusting that God is who He says He is even when your circumstances scream otherwise.
  - ▶ If you try to measure God's goodness and love by your circumstances you’ll conclude like Naomi that He’s against you. But His promises say otherwise. He promised in **Romans 8:28** that “*for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*”



- ❖ ***Friends, do you believe God is up to something good in your life even when it hurts?*** In the weeks ahead, we'll see how God fulfills His promise in the story of Ruth to work all things for good. We will see God's sweet providence work itself out, but here in chapter one we have to walk by faith and trust when we cannot see.
- ▶ *Judge not the Lord by feeble sense / But trust Him for His grace. / Behind a frowning providence / He hides a smiling face. / God's purposes will ripen fast / Unfolding every hour. / The bud may have a bitter taste / But sweet will be the flower.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William Cowper, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way".