

11/8/20 - Ruth 1 - "The Reality of God's Providence"

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[0 : 00] If you can recall, Charles Dickens, he wrote The Christmas Carol. You know that old tale that was turned to film. The first novel he ever wrote in his professional writing career is known as The Pickwick Papers.

That's from back in 1837, or 18, I got the numbers messed up, 1838. And this is a novel that turned to film in the early 1900s, turned to an animated film in 1985.

And it tells a story, the main character's name in this story is Samuel Pickwick. And so Samuel, it sort of reminds me of a modern day, like Little Rascals movie, where they have the He-Man Woman Haters Club, you know.

This is a story, a novel about this Pickwickians, this little club. And so Samuel would take a couple of his friends, and they would explore the remote areas and the boundaries of London.

And so they would be all in the countryside exploring the world, and they would come back and report their findings to the members of this club of what's going on outside of where we are now.

[1 : 09] And so Samuel Pickwick, this main character, reported back of the many various findings of his journeys with his friends. But he concluded in his journeys, and Dickens writes in his book, there are dark shadows on the earth, but its lights are stronger in the contrast.

Simply stating, the darker the shadows are upon this earth, the more radiant the light is to be contrasted. Through Pickwick's journeys, this was simply something clever, as he captured throughout the highs and the lows of his journeys through the countryside of London.

And what Dickens was able to vividly capture within this novel, within the pages of this novel, is the intensity of life that mankind experienced throughout the ages in which we are reckoned with the reality of the perceived bleakness and joyousness of none other than the providence of God.

John Piper had a good article on the providence of God, and he actually quotes the Heidelberg Catechism in question 27. Providence of God is therefore stated as this.

It is the almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were, by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures, and so governs them, that herbs and grass, rain and droughts, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yeah, all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hands.

[3 : 07] It reminds me of that Chris, I think it's Chris Tomlin's song, how he sings, you give and take away. Blessed be your name. This is the reality in life.

This is something that I believe Dickens records, but doesn't pinpoint with the providence of God.

The providence of God has the power of bringing us crippled to our knees, almost in sheer pain, and at times lifting us out of our skin in great joy and praise and adoration of him.

And the book of Ruth truly captures all of this in great vibrancy. This book is a historical narrative of scripture recorded in 11 to 14 BCE.

And just as Charles Dickens creatively portrays the reality of dark shadows on the earth, but the lights are stronger in the contrast, this reality, church, comes to life in the book of Ruth.

What Samuel Pickwick captured in this novel is what we see in the book of Ruth. So as we scour the pages of scripture within the next several minutes and the next couple weeks, I want us to ask ourselves this resounding question, church.

[4 : 22] I want us to ask, how can we have hope in the midst of the dark shadows of God's providence? How can we have hope in the midst of the dark shadows of God's providence?

This first chapter of Ruth illustrates a plot structure, and we're going to be observing that into three different sections. A plot structure basically has, like any good writing, it has a rising action, something to keep you engaged.

And then all of a sudden, there's this big resolution, this climax, and then some falling action and a new scene. What we have here in the book of Ruth in chapter one is that plot structure.

And so we're going to look at that in three different sections today. But first, let's turn to the Lord in prayer as we begin our journey with Ruth. Let's pray. Father in heaven, we turn to you as the supreme agency of all that we experience in life, whether perceived as good or perceived as bad. We remember the darkness of Calvary and your wrath poured out upon Jesus Christ as he died a substitutionary death on our behalf to atone and forgive our sins.

[5 : 40] Jesus, we are thankful for your sacrifice that you freely gave for us. And Holy Spirit, help us now to understand and comprehend this text that you inspired.

We pray that you bring forth the message and the fruits therein. And it's in Jesus' precious name we pray today. Amen. Amen.

Let's look at this first section. It's a section titled, The Dark Reality of God's Providence, I believe. I think it should be up on the screen.

The Shadow of God's Providence. And as we already have read in full today, this first chapter is very bleak.

This first chapter in Ruth is very tense. This first chapter is very moroseful. It has pain in it. It's a very difficult first chapter.

[6 : 42] And we see an important literary marker, which brings the backdrop of pain and suffering in verse 11. Read with me. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem and Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.

We don't have to travel too far in verse 1 to know exactly. Being a church that we just came out of a series last year, in the book of Judges, how dark that was, how dreary that was, but how great that contrast was with the darkness with the light of God's provision for his people, and that he heard their cries at certain instances.

We don't have to read far into this to know what these days looked like. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.

Doesn't that set up a pretty good picture? This is the dark clouds of a narrative that the author puts together here. And we also see that this compelled a family to escape this darkness and to sojourn, to escape the famine, and to sojourn, to find means of survival.

And isn't this unique, church? I just want to picture this. When we talk about the providence of God, this is a unique picture because where they're escaping from is Bethlehem in Judah.

[8 : 27] Bethlehem means the house of bread. This is a place where God abundantly provides for his people.

And what do we find out? There's a famine. Doesn't this bring about just that uniqueness of the providence of God, the land of great providence of God?

And so they escape to Moab, a pagan land. And we see that the Moabites, if you know anything about Lot, the Moabites were founded by the offspring of incest between Lot and his oldest daughter.

And in this land of voluntary sojourning, as this family takes on, their sons marry pagan women. And his loyalty to God, Elimelech, appears to have completely faltered.

Now, before we be too hard on these people, I want us to paint a picture. I want us to understand this in real time. Can you imagine a famine so great that would cause you to relocate your entire family?

[9 : 43] To uproot from where you are rooted among people who are God's chosen people, a chosen nation, to leave that.

A famine so great just to survive. Think of the sheer desperation that this family was experiencing. Being a husband and a father, who I would personally literally do anything at times to make sure that my family is provided for, I don't think that we can escape the reality of our own tendencies that we may have done the same as Elimelech's family.

And we see an important element here in this text, and I don't want you to miss this. We must think for a minute. The book of Judges is a gloomy depiction of man's rebellion, right?

The people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And then about halfway through the book, after Samson, they started doing what was right in their own eyes.

Just complete chaos, a cycle of sin. Isn't this about man's rebellion, the book of Judges? But also God's punishment, his discipline for his people.

[11:02] So capture that narrative and look at it in light of the text today. So what this man was doing, Elimelech and his family, was escaping the just, the deserved, and warranted providence of God's discipline to endure that famine, to escape so this family could maybe endure.

And in verse three, we see that this man and this whole family, things didn't end well for them.

Anyone in the family, actually.

A woman whose name is Naomi, watches the men of her life instantly be taken away from her.

Within an instant, Elimelech, her husband, is taken away.

Ten years later, instantly, her sons were taken away. The men in her family were taken away. This is a vivid depiction of the dark providence of God.

The perceived dark providence of God. Now, obviously, if you're not married, maybe you don't even have a boyfriend today. It's kind of hard to kind of read a text like this.

[12:15] You don't really know and experience that. But just imagine being one of those daughters. Imagine being a sibling, watching your family all of a sudden die.

If you're married and you don't have kids, you can still see this as well. You can imagine your husband just suddenly gone within an instant.

And if you're a family with children, I can't even say just instantly losing your children. I can't even say it.

But verse 6 and 7, we see that Naomi is left widowed. And the only remaining family is her Moabite daughters-in-law. And then Naomi does the unthinkable, incomprehensible at this moment.

She plans to return to Bethlehem and Judah. And the word return, and I want this to be in everyone's notes today and in your mind.

[13:18] The word return is important in this passage. It appears 12 different times. And I think it's significant as we kind of scour this first chapter. While this has locative significance in this passage of returning from one place to another, it also holds very good spiritual, deep spiritual significance that is emblematic of returning and turning back to God.

What this family is essentially doing is returning and repenting. And so we observe the story shift at this point.

A narrative that originated in faithful people of God, departing from God to now the prodigal return of the people of God.

And not just to the land of promise, but to Yahweh himself. In essence, church, within this broken narrative of lost life, of sojourning, of escaping God's provided famine, Naomi is essentially returning to her first love, Yahweh.

And in that, her heart longs for true bread from him. We too can have hope in the midst of the dark shadows of God's providence, I believe.

[14:44] But our loyalty and highest allegiance is to the Lord alone regardless. Better for us to realize it that the only one that we can turn to if we are receiving discipline of the Lord, if we're experiencing those shadows of God's providence in our lives, we shouldn't run from it.

We gotta realize that our highest allegiance is to Yahweh. Better for us to realize it before he makes us realize it, right, church? And we see dimensions of providence in this passage.

God's providence is one of great darkness. We see famine in Judah. We see the death of Elimelech and his sons. But also one of great joy as the story of redemption continues in the next several weeks as we study how things turn for Ruth.

But when the dark shadows of God's providence eventually appear in your life, are you prone to abandon God who is supreme over your life? When the dark shadows of God's providence eventually appear in your life, are you prone to abandon the God who is supreme over your life? I've heard it like this. There's a pastor and teacher, Erwin Lutzer, who's very heavily connected in Moody Bible Chapel, Moody Church Seminary.

[16:11] And I've heard him say it like something along these lines. That God's will throughout history is like a tapestry. Has anybody heard something similar to this?

Anyone? No. God's will throughout history is like a tapestry. Looking at a tapestry, looking at anything that's sown, if you turn the display side over from that tapestry, it looks like an absolute mess.

You see knots, you see strings everywhere. I wonder, what the heck is going on? What are you making? And the will of God is often like this.

We're looking underneath, looking up at the tapestry of his will. And all the random threads, the knots, and the snarls of string, it just doesn't make sense to us.

And we can't see the tapestry of history like God sees it, plain and simple. From his perspective, it tells a story of his love and a plan for mankind from the beginning of time.

[17 : 27] We fear disasters, don't we, church? We fear death. We fear poverty. We fear uncertainty. And I believe this is because when we experience the occurrence of such things, it makes us seem like God actually isn't in control.

It makes us doubt God that when we experience a famine in the land, we often look upon God in the scriptures of the pages and we ask him, God, look at us.

We're suffering. Don't you hear us? At times in this life, as if somehow things have slipped out of his divine grip.

Church, may we remember that during such time, a single thread in the grand tapestry cannot comprehend the pattern of the whole. That God, in fact, is knitting together a masterpiece.

And hopefully, one day, we will have the opportunity to see that final masterpiece put together of how everything, every strand of string fits together.

[18 : 45] Our view is too limited to perceive any ultimate meaning in calamity and how our present suffering fits into God's ultimate purpose.

So may our perspective shift, church. when the tapestry seems bleak, when it seems moroseful, and remember the darkness of God's providence, which was revealed in every inch of Jesus' flesh that was ripped on his body, of every drop of blood that was shed.

May we remember when we experience the darkness of God's providence, we remember Christ and all his sufferings, all of which revealed the wrath and justice of God.

And might we be encouraged by the apostle Paul and trust in the tapestry of his will that we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.

Let us hold fast to Jesus Christ in the darkness of providence and continue to trust God. And we see that this is actually where the narrative begins to shift. It's into a trust aspect.

[19 : 58] So section two today is between verse eight through verse 17. And we see a very sad scene. Very sad scene.

The author creates a reality of sadness, of lifting voices. Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return, to leave her.

Back to their families. Her hope is that the Lord would reciprocate his kindness based on their kindness towards Naomi. That just as they've been kind to Naomi, she prays that the Lord will be kind back to her and ask for the blessings of rest to find another husband.

And as the chapter continues to push towards that apex, we're in the tension part of this passage. passage, we get a glimpse and contrast between the attitudes of Ruth and the attitudes of Orpah. We see some similarities in verse nine of both. Look with me. Both of them lifted their voices and wept at the idea of Naomi departing from them, of going back to their people and not seeing Naomi anymore.

[21 : 14] And then in verse 14, we see some differences. We see Orpah seems to be enticed with that second plea of childbearing, of her own idea of how she wants her life to be worked out.

Orpah was enticed to depart due to the greater hope of finding a husband in her own hometown, but Ruth was enticed to remain due to her concern of Naomi's sojourning alone, even if it meant Ruth would never experience marriage or bear a child.

There were no strings attached to this. And now, church, just a little FYI, public service announcement. While it's important to approach Scripture in a theocentric approach, we have to avoid sort of the modeling of human characters within the Bible.

You know, no, we're not, it's not calling us to be like Ruth. The Bible calls us to a theocentric approach to Scripture of observing attitudes, of observing hearts and contrasting them with our own.

How many preachers often preach this text of you need to treat your mother kind, like Ruth? Pull this one out for Mother's Day. You must remember that the Bible is about God, right?

[22 : 42] And so his presence, his actions of providence and his plans must be central in applying and understanding the text that God has for us.

And so, we might ask, okay, Brent, wise guy, how do we theologically see Ruth and Orpah? Isn't Ruth's loyalty to Naomi one without conditions in contrast with Orpah?

That's a contrast between them, but think of even back to Elimelech. What was his attitude? What were his actions? Why would he leave the famine in the land?

Similar to Orpah. His loyalties were definitely not towards God. Orpah's loyalties were not towards God. And there we have the key of theological reflection, church, right?

Do we trust God when the odds are not in our perceived favor? When we're about to embark in an unknown realm of uncertainty and often missing all logic?

[23 : 52] Where does our allegiance lie? Is it in Jesus Christ alone? Or is it with Jesus Christ with a couple contingencies, right? And then we see this theology of that theological reflection hits its climax as revealed to us in verse 17, 16 and 17.

The storyline hits its peak and the determination of Ruth is intensely revealed. Look with me in verse 16. It says, But Ruth said, Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go, I will go. 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. And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said, No more.

We see this as an idem per idem. It's a figure of speech of you applying your actions with the same parallel significance of somebody else's actions.

[25 : 14] And we have the climax of this passage. Your direction, Naomi, mother of mine. Your direction in life is my direction. Your ancestors are mine.

Your worship is my worship. Your end is my end. I am with you regardless. Ruth calls upon even a curse, church, to come upon her if she ever departs from Naomi.

And interestingly enough, what do we see in a limilex life? His disobedience led to what may be a curse. It's not found in scripture, but the way this text is alluded to is very well could prove that.

And do you follow God with such similar fervor that regardless of where God is leading you, regardless if you are bearing a child, regardless if you have a husband or have a wife?

Will you go? Based on a non-contingent approach. Church, when you are faced with great uncertainty and sureness of unfavorable conditions that may expose themselves in your life, where does your loyalty rest?

[26 : 34] Where does your loyalty rest? Might your loyalty rest in things other than God alone? Maybe with the attitude of Orpah or the attitude of Elimelech of fleeing from the just famine of God.

Sacrificing worship to God for maybe financial stability and just working your life away so you live a cushy life. Sacrificing worship to God for satisfaction that literally only spans a lifetime.

Or are you worshipping God for eternal pursuits? What these two widows were determined to do is to return to their God. And this truly is launching a story of redemption of not only the Israelites because as Naomi is a Israelite that she is one of God's people, now we have this pagan Moabite woman following Naomi back, which I believe is like a typological allusion to the inclusion of Gentiles within the people and the family of God.

Can you recall the similar determination of Jesus Christ knowing full well the suffering that his sacrifice would reveal? When we often get so caught up in just these first world problems of my car died, oh my goodness, persecution, my whole week's thrown off and I'm going to have to do this and that.

I don't want to minimize your problems, I just want to bring your problems into perspective. Okay?

Can you recall the similar determination of Jesus Christ knowing full well that his suffering on the cross and his sacrifice, that it would reveal a lot of pain, a lot of suffering, but still he remained faithful in the midst of God's providence even though it meant such great suffering.

[28 : 30] When all uncertainty of God's providence weighs against our faith, where does your loyalty tend to sway? Towards God or towards yourself? Our worship of God ought to predicate unconditional love.

End of story. And so we see as this chapter comes to an end, we see in section three, we see broken Naomi and faithful Ruth.

They make their 60-mile trek up over the Dead Sea back to Bethlehem. And the return of Naomi, as understood as an act of repentance, as she is returning, remember, think repentance in this passage, as she's returning, as she's repenting back, it creates quite a stir in Bethlehem in verse 19.

And as this chapter reaches, it leaves us in sheer brokenness. Can't you feel the sense of brokenness in verse 19 as it's recorded? That these people are saying, is this Naomi? I mean, how long has it been? It's been a couple, maybe close to two decades potentially. Is this Naomi? She said to them, do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

[29 : 57] And the author of this book of Ruth uses a creative writing method and one that we can understand as being a play on words, that names are significant in this passage.

They all mean something and they tie into the narrative. So just to make an example, Elimelech means my God is king.

Isn't that ironic? After fleeing from the famine. Naomi, her name, used to be as she's talking about here, meaning pleasant and sweet. Malon means illness.

Chilion means destruction. Orpah means stubborn. Right? Ruth means friends. All of these indicate crucial parts of bringing this passage into context.

And here, Naomi, which means sweet, has to be called Mara, which means bitter. Here we get insight to the family's broken narrative, right?

[30 : 59] I mean, think about Elimelech being a man of God. This is, my God is king, Elimelech. Think, very strong, mighty man of God.

A man who would never doubt his savior. Oh, we're experiencing a famine of land. I did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Oh, we better get out of here. We're going to starve.

Come on, Naomi. Cowardly sojourning to a pagan land to escape the realities of God's providence. We see Naomi repent, literally surrendering any self-worth and exchanging it with guilt and accepting the bleak reality of her disobedience in this passage.

church. In a time that most would return and bring a laundry list of justification, of why we left, we can sort of see her attitude and where our attitude would fall short.

[32 : 06] We would probably say, well, you know, we thought this and did this and, and, but, you know, it wasn't that bad of a decision because, look, I brought a pagan, you know, we're witnessing, you know, we're bringing people into the fold of God, you know.

So, you know, these are good things. In a time where most of us would return to the land and bring all this laundry list of justification of why we left and departed in the first place, out of preservation of our own image, of preservation of our own honor at times, we don't want people to look down on us so we find ways of justifying our actions.

Church, this is not repentance at all. True repentance is revealed in a heart that has no desire to defend, no desire to justify.

True repentance has no strings attached. True repentance is often found lacking the words to articulate our extreme inner bitterness against ourselves.

our extreme level of grief. Repentance is not a time to justify our actions but to abhor them and let God do the rest of the work as he so desires.

[33 : 27] This was surely evident in this widow's life as she returned to the Lord. Her God is true. Deep repentance for her unjust file wanderings from him. And we see what a time to return to the Lord.

This was during the barley harvest. And this was no ordinary time to return or to repent in this context. This was the time of the barley harvest, a time known as God's favor.

The barley harvest. This is commemorated by the feast of Passover, the feast of unleavened bread. And barley is an interesting crop. It was the first crop to be harvested in the springtime.

And it was harvested in late April. And so it served as a first fruit offering. Nobody would take the barley. They would give it back to God as the first fruit of their labor.

And this is seen in Leviticus 23, verse 9, which is an indicator of the prosperity of the coming year. So the first fruits they would give back to God, kind of where we get the illustration of our income, giving back the first fruits of our income.

[34 : 42] For Naomi, this would also mark the first fruits of a season of return, a season of restoration for the great provision to come in the following season, just like the barley harvest.

This we will see in the coming weeks. And the same is true, church. The first fruits of our disobedience and sin can only be repentance. It can only be repentance and returning similarly to the Lord when we disobey him and sin against him.

But we can be assured that by the grace of God, forgiveness awaits for those who belong to Jesus Christ. No matter the act of any disobedience, and now it doesn't mean that the life will be, your life will be perfectly put back into order just as it was.

No, because sin does have consequence often. Sin is messy. And some testimonies that I hear from folks that are out on the street and things that they've experienced, it is a testimony of that. It just doesn't magically go away. Sin has consequence. Sin is messy. But we can be assured that by the grace of God, forgiveness awaits regardless.

[35 : 57] May your repentance also not have strings attached as well. And I'm encouraged by 1 Peter 5, 6, where it says, Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time, he will exalt you.

True repentance, church. I opened up the chapter today with a challenge. Something to think about. How can we have hope in the midst of the dark shadows of God's providence?

I hope you can analyze and survey this word today of how we can analyze hope in the providence of God. We can have hope that the Lord disciplines us.

The Lord's discipline of famine often in our lives is the most loving thing that he can do for our souls. That's a countercultural message, isn't it?

We can have hope that our trust in God supersedes any earthly riches and amenities of this life, similar to those marriage vows that Ruth gives to Naomi.

[37 : 08] Till death do us part. We can trust in God in that way. We can also have hope in our repentance to God that he takes our broken narrative and reveals a tapestry of grace in our lives.

Truly, Dickens had it right when he said, there are dark shadows on the earth, but its light are stronger in the contrast. Might we see this and reflect upon our own lives and the condition of our country and the condition of our world?

Might we see the tapestry of life through the eyes of God, church? Might our minds be determined to serve the Lord regardless of the cost, regardless of the strings we may attach to that?

I encourage us all to mature ourselves in the reality of God's providence, being that it's always good. It's always good regardless of the perceived darkness that we see in his providence.

You want to know what the problem of evil is? That's the biggest question among atheists and agnostics around the world. It's the problem of evil. If God is such a good God, then why is this happening?

[38 : 24] Well, you want to know the problem of evil? It's the goodness of God. The problem of evil is the goodness of God. Just as a shadow cannot exist without a source of illumination to show that shadow to be true.

Similarly, we see evil and it's only possible to be observed through the scope of God's goodness. That we can trust in that flipped tapestry at all times, even when we experience evil and hardships. This we know. God's light is shining in the midst of darkness. Amen? Maturity is knowing it and believing it.

Maturity is redirecting our attention off of the shadows and searching for the light which illuminates that shadow, that casts that shadow. Naomi understands that no matter what happens to her, good or ill, her circumstances are playing out according to the providence of God.

And may this be so for us as well. Let's pray.