

# A Sweet and Bitter Providence

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, this week we begin a four-part series in the book of Ruth, and I love this book.

I love the book of Ruth. Two big reasons. One, it contains some of the great universal truths about God, and we see these truths played out not on a grand scale, not on battlefields or palaces or amphitheatres or mountaintops, but the great truths of God are played out in the life of a small family in a village.

I just think that's really beautiful, and it says something about God caring for individuals, I think. I also like it because it happens at this really transitional time for God's people.

Ruth, as you can see in your Bible, sits right between Samuel and Judges, all right? So Judges at the back end, Samuel at the front end, and in a sense, it kind of glues these books together because we know that because it starts off by saying, in the days when Judges ruled.

That's the first line. You know what the last word in the book of Ruth is, though? It's David. It's the last word. It ends with this line, and I'm spoiling the story for you, but Ruth gets married to Boaz and they have a baby, right?

[ 1 : 16 ] Um, that the son, the baby is a boy. It's called Obed, and he was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. So it starts in this very dark time in Israel's history.

The final sentence of the book of Judges, the final sentence immediately before the book of Ruth starts is this. In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

But it ends, so that's terrible, right? But it ends by pointing us to this future king, David, who will unite his people, defeat their enemies, and bring prosperity, et cetera. More about that in the next couple of weeks.

Because this chapter we're in now, there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of prosperity happening. Verses 1 and 2 set the stage here. There was a famine in Bethlehem, which is ironic, because Bethlehem means house of bread.

It's supposed to be a very fertile place. But anyway, there's a famine in the house of bread. And this guy, Elimelech, he gets his family and he takes them to this place called Moab, which, as it turns out, wasn't a great move.

[ 2 : 30 ] Moab is an enemy to Israel. And this guy, the dad, doesn't have any real connection to this place, except that he knows that they don't have a famine going on. So he moves his family there. Moab is a pagan country.

They worship a god called Chemosh, who sacrifices people. So the dad takes his wife Naomi and his kids Malon, which means sick, and Chilion, which means annihilation.

And I mean, you kind of know it's not going to end well for these guys, right? So he takes sick and annihilation and his wife Naomi, which means lovely, and he takes them to this pagan territory Moab to start this new life.

Verses 3, 4, and 5. It all just goes sideways pretty quick. Naomi loses her husband and his sons and therefore her inheritance. Now there's some legal stuff that goes around this about why she loses her inheritance and stuff, but we'll probably talk about that in the weeks to come.

But here's how it plays out. So the husband dies. That's terrible. But she's still got her sons. The boys marry some local girls, which is, I don't know, it's a bit kind of dodgy marrying the local kind of Moabite girls.

[ 3 : 40 ] But anyway, Naomi was probably pretty happy about it, I guess. Anyway, 10 years later, they haven't produced any kids, which is, it says there, they were there for 10 years, right? They hadn't produced any kids after 10 years, and that's bad culturally in terms of maintaining a family line.

And then Malion, sick, and Chilean, annihilation, die. And there's no great surprise there, but they die. So here is Naomi. She's in this pagan city. All the male members of her family are dead. She is in real trouble. Five verses, her whole family is just, it's just all over for them, right? It is a terrible situation that she is in. She is completely empty, as she describes later on. It is this, and that's the picture that it's trying to paint. It's painting the picture of this woman in this incredibly desperate situation, who actually embodies the desperate situation and dark place of the Israelites or in general.

All right, let's keep going. Verses six and seven. A little ray of hope. Naomi hears that the famine in Judah is over. It says, the Lord has visited his people and given them food.

[ 4 : 50 ] That's in verse six. So despite the deaths, Naomi does have a couple of gains. She does have her daughters who love her, and this reason to go home.

The famine is over. And I want you to notice that Naomi does attribute this good turn to God. It's God that turns the famine around. It doesn't say the economy picked up or the harvest was strangely plentiful that year or anything like that.

It says, the Lord visited his people. And this is a major theme in Ruth, that God is in control, that God is sovereign. And at this point, I just want to remind you of something. It's easy for us to say God is in control when things are going well, right?

But God is still in control when it's all going sideways in our life. And that's an important truth to hang on to. I think that's a comforting truth. I remember being in a meeting a Christian organization I worked in in New Zealand, and something really great happened, and it was being announced in the staff meeting.

And the boss said, oh, God is good. And our very bolshy receptionist said, hang on. God is always good. And there was silence, and it was a bit awkward.

[ 6 : 03 ] But it stuck in my mind, actually, because she was absolutely right. God was always good, even before this big funding thing sort of came into the organization. Okay, verses 8 to 13.

Naomi tries to convince her daughters to go back to Moab while she continues on to Judah. So she's decided, I'm going to go back to Judah. And she just thinks it makes sense, the girls, you guys, you're from Moabites.

You should go back there. You've got some family back there. That's the best move for you. And there is this very extended scene here. They give a lot of time to this conversation.

So you know when the Bible gives a lot of time to a conversation, there's some gold in there. So let's have a look. Okay. Naomi has two cracks at sending the daughters back.

Firstly, she just sort of says, okay, then, you should probably go now. This is verses 8. Go, return each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me.

[ 7 : 09 ] The Lord grant you, you find rest. Each of you in the house of your husband, she kisses them, and they lift up their voices and wept. It's a kind of a, okay, you should go now. You've got a good chance of having the secure life back in, you know, Moab.

And she prays for them. And this word, she prays that God would deal kindly with them. This word hesed, it's the word hesed, kindly. It's like a loyalty. It's going to come up quite a bit in Ruth, but we'll talk about it next week.

Okay. Go each return to your mother's house. See you later. Okay, then. On your bikes. Off you go. We all know the smart move is to go back to Moab.

But they both refuse. So Moab steps it up a bit. She tries to show them how absurd it would be to stay with her. It's just a ridiculous, stupid thing to do, to stay with her.

Verse 11. Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? And this is what she's saying. She's going, I'm not going to get married again.

[ 8 : 15 ] And even if I did, and even if I got pregnant straight away, are you guys going to wait around for 20 years?

Because it was the custom that widows married the brothers of their dead husbands, right? You're going to wait around for 20 years? Is that what you're going to do? And on top of, is this a plausible scenario to you, ladies?

And on top of all that, she says, the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. That's in verse 13. Do you really want to give up your chance to go back to your own home and maybe get married and seal down to stay with me?

No hope, Naomi, who God is against? That's her perception, right? That's what you want to do? Really? It's a very dramatic scene. Why does the author spend so much time giving us so much detail of this conversation?

Three reasons. One, it's to emphasize Naomi's misery. To show us that she is completely miserable.

[ 9 : 23 ] And the point of that is to make her redemption all the more awesome. So that we are convinced at the ends that her redemption, her great reversal of fortunes, is not just that she has a really, you know, like a good run of luck.

But in fact, it's the intervention of God in her life because she is in such a tough situation. Second reason we have so much detail here is all this talk about marrying people and having babies and having heirs.

Because it's setting up the rest of the book because that's how God is going to redeem her. But more about that next week. Thirdly, Naomi's pain is so visceral that it serves to highlight Ruth's faithfulness to her.

So, spoiler, so Ruth stays, as you heard, okay? Ruth sticks around. Okay. It's to highlight Ruth's faithfulness to her. Naomi paints this really bleak picture of her future and Ruth is willing to take her hand and willing to walk into that future with her.

Which is astounding. Before we get on to that, I want to ask you two questions, though. What do you think of what Naomi says here? When she says, The hand of the Lord has gone out against me.

[ 10 : 42 ] Does it strike you as kind of, It's kind of interesting, eh? That she would say that. Is she right? Is she right? Well, I think her theology is good and bad.

I think she's right and she's wrong. She's solid in that she believes without question a number of very good things. She believes that God exists.

That's positive. When there's no, oh, my life really sucks, you know, there is no God. She's not thinking that, you know. She also believes that God is sovereign.

That he's in charge. You know, it was God that she says that ended the famine. It was God that brought this misery on her. So that's all good. I really like her honesty as well.

She's saying what she thinks. She is not, you know, our relationship with God should always be, should always be honest. Eugene Peter says that we should never be embarrassed about praying things to God.

[ 11 : 48 ] What's going on in our hearts? Even our hatred must be prayed. We should never lie to God pretending things are okay when they're actually not. Prayers without honesty is it's empty religion, okay.

So I like her honesty. But where does she go wrong? I think this is where she goes wrong. In the midst of her bitterness, she fails to see the glimpses of God at work in her life. And they are that, you know, that God has opened up her way for her to go home by ending the famine.

And she has Ruth, this incredibly devoted daughter-in-law. And that's awesome. Folks, if you feel empty, if you feel ripped off by life, if you feel hopeless, perhaps you could recognize that a good meal and loyal friends is the work of God in your life, is a mercy in your life, is a great gift in your life. A gift that can sustain you until God dispels all the darkness in the world at world's end. Verse 14. Here's what I just talked about. Then they lifted up their voices and wept, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So my other question is this.

[ 13 : 11 ] Should we be annoyed at Orpah? I don't think so. I mean, I think she just did the sensible thing. She did the thing that made sense.

I think we should be understanding. I think with Ruth, though, she was amazing, you know. Her faith should be emulated. I think that's our attitude.

That's the right attitude. Orpah, we understand you. Ruth, we want to be like you. Okay, now. Let's have a look at Ruth's response to Naomi. It's just fantastic.

First of all, the picture of Ruth clinging to Naomi, it's a beautiful sight, right? Clinging to her. This clinging word, it's a marriage word. It's like cleaving. It's like betrothing.

It's like, yes, we're together in this, you know. It's not, you know, hey, hey, Naomi, gnomester. I'm your buddy. You know, it's not that.

[ 14 : 08 ] It's like they kind of get married almost. I didn't say that. You know, it's like they kind of like, you know, like they, but it has that heaviness about it. That kind of commitment. Somebody

mouthed commitment to me.

Thank you. Yeah. 16 to 18 here. Here's their speech. I'll read it out against you. Ruth said, 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 I'll 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. I mean, this is just astounding, right?

Ruth is saying, you know, this is what it means for Ruth. It means I'm going to leave my family and my land. It means I'll likely live a life of widowhood, childlessness. It means going to this unknown land, new people, new customs.

[15:08] She's going to be the weird, you know, foreigner from the crazy country. It means where you go, I will go. It means where you die, I will die. In other words, I will never return.

This is the depth of my commitment to you, Naomi. I will never return. My favorite car show is Top Gear.

Maybe my favorite show on television is Top Gear. It's the show about cars. And in, I think, season three, I think, they got this 1988 diesel Toyota Hilux.

It had over 300,000 kilometers on it. And they heard that this thing was just an amazing vehicle, right? A Toyota Hilux, which it is. And so they just subjected it to this extraordinary abuse, right, which consisted of driving down a flight of steps, just driving it sort of into buildings like so it's crunching up against buildings, crashing it headlong into a tree, letting it being washed out to sea, whereas underwater for four hours.

And now every time they did this, they would, after they subjected it to something, they had a guy, like a mechanic, who was only allowed a screwdriver and a wrench and something else, like just a couple of tools.

[16:27] He could bring no new parts, and he just had to get the thing started again. Right? So like a couple of tools, no new parts. And every time they did something, he would get it started again.

They drove it through a garden shed. They dropped a caravan onto it. They hit it with a wrecking ball. They set it on fire. And then finally, they placed it on top of a 240-foot block of apartments and then demolished the apartments.

And so it started. It started down. And the truck was still running. And if you ever watch Top Gear, which I recommend it to you, you will see this Hilux truck in the background, which they put on a plinth.

Not a plinth, it's like a mantle like this. They created this thing to put it on top of. And it is forever in the studio as this testament to its reliability and strength.

Now, I thought of that episode when I was reading Ruth's response here. I really like the idea of this because I remember them going, they're almost like quite emotional about it.

[17:42] They're going, we're going to make sure this is forever known as this incredible thing. This monument. This amazing vehicle. And I thought about this because this speech here to me is this monument to strength and faithfulness.

It stands out in the Bible as this incredible testimony to loyalty.

I love it. I love it. Right, so, Ruth. Determined that nothing is going to separate her from Naomi, not even death.

Now, did you notice that at the guts of her commitment to Naomi was this commitment to share Naomi's God? Your God will be my God. And the way it's written, originally the way it was written, it was meant to draw our attention to that central point there, that central, that focus point of a little speech.

Your God will be my God. The narrator here wants us to see that this whole story points beyond itself. It's more than a great story about human loyalty, although it is that.

[18:53] Ruth's loyalty to Naomi points to the hesed, the kindness, the loyalty of God to his people, which is going to be demonstrated in this really dark time in Israel's history.

Now, that won't be realized until later, and we'll see that unfolding in the next couple of weeks because it's still pretty dark right now. Verses 19 to 22. So Ruth and Naomi head back to Bethlehem.

The local woman are really happy to see her, and they go, Hey, Naomi! And she says, Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, which means bitter. And she goes on to say how, you know, she left here full

with her husband, kids, money, and she has returned empty.

As I said before, in her bitterness, she can't see the provision that God has made for her, which is hinted at this final verse here. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. She came right at the beginning of this awesome harvest with this incredibly loyal, committed daughter-in-law. Okay, let's wrap it up here. All right.

[ 20 : 00 ] Main points. If out of a sermon you think to yourself, I'm going to call my mum and tell her I love her, I think that would be great.

You should do that. If you thought to yourself, you know what, I can be a much better friend than I have been, that would be great too. You should probably do that. But you know that the lessons are far more sublime, right?

I think you know that. See, here we go. I've got three lessons here, I think, out of Ruth chapter one. Number one, God is sovereign. God rules the nations, God rules the families.

In the words of John Piper, from the toothpick to the Taj Mahal, God is in charge of it all. I think that should be a great comfort to us. Two, God's providence is bitter and it is sweet.

It's bitter and it is sweet. When God intervenes in the world, it is really difficult sometimes. It can be hard.

[ 21 : 09 ] It can be tough. God did deal bitterly with Naomi, right? Like in the short term. It was very, very difficult for her.

It really broke her. But in the midst of pain, don't miss the sweet things God might be doing in your life.

Don't let it blind you so that you can't see these things. Three, in this story, a family who makes good with God's help, you know, this is, this is not a promise that God will give you a husband or a wife or children.

It is, it is much more, although, pray for those things. They're great blessings. Pray for those things. But it is not a promise that God will provide them if you just believe enough.

This is much more about God's big family, which we had a mess at that time, without hope, and God brought redemption to them on the grandest scale.

[ 22 : 25 ] I mean, God brought them King David, you know, through this family. So the hope of this passage is not that God will give you an earthly family of your dreams or, you know, your dream house or dream job or amazing kids.

That's not the, that is not the hope of this text. Although, those are wonderful things. But it is not the hope of this text. The hope is that God will save you and bring you into his family.

And whether your heart recognizes it or not, recognize it or not, that, in fact, is your greatest need. Amen. Amen.