

Ruth 1

~ A Sweet & Bitter Providence ~

Introduction

In her small yet encouraging book titled: '*suffering is never for nothing*' author and missionary Elisabeth Elliot writes the following sentence:

I look upon suffering as one of God's ways in getting our attention

When I was told that my first husband, Jim, was missing in Auca Indian Country, the Lord brought to my mind some words from the Prophet Isaiah:

'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they shall not overflow you... – Isaiah 43:2'

I prayed silently: 'Lord, let not the waters overflow. And He heard me, and He answered me.'

Two years later I went to live with the Indians who had killed my Husband... and many years after that I came back to the

*United States where I married a man named Addison Leitch –
He died of cancer three and a half years later.*

She writes:

*There have been some hard things in my life; as I'm sure
there have been in yours, and I cannot say to you that I
know **exactly** what you're going through. But I can say
this: 'I know the One who knows...'*

*I know the One who knows; and I've come to see that it's
through the **deepest** suffering that God has taught me the
deepest lessons...*

*“Our Suffering is **NEVER** for nothing...”*

God is at work in the mess

*Oh my... what better words could we use to describe the book of
Ruth here this morning than with these words:*

*“Our suffering is **never** for nothing”*

I've titled this series: *Ruth – God in the mess* – because I believe
that at the very heart of this small little story (a story that is
nestled between the book of Judges and 1st Samuel) is a short

story given by God in order to direct our hearts and minds in the darkest of days (and in the deepest of pain) to this one – all-encompassing – truth:

God is at work in the mess X2

That in the worst of times; in the best of times, in the chaos of our lives, in the pain of our marriage, in the brokenness of our sin, in the messiness of life:

God is at the very center of it all – painting a most beautiful picture of grace, beauty, & hope...

God is at work in the mess!

[SLIDE]

That is the main point of the book of Ruth, and the main message that we will see as we embark on our 4 week journey through this little treasure...

Our suffering is **never** for nothing! Because God is at work in the mess!

Ruth: unique yet common

The book of Ruth has been described by one poet as:

*The most beautiful **short** story ever written! X2*

And although it is a most beautiful story – it is **at the same time** a very interesting story:

1. The author is **never once** mentioned in the entire book...
2. God **looks seemingly distant** and **uninvolved** throughout the book...
3. And the main character (Ruth) from whom the whole book finds its very title rarely ever gets more than a verse or 2 of dialogue!

And so by all accounts this is a very beautiful yet perplexing story!

Themes of Ruth

Perhaps the best description that we can give is found in the words of Old Testament scholar and theologian Christopher Ash when he writes:

[SLIDE]

“The book of Ruth is a happy story, it is a true story, it is a brief comedy, in whose small space the gospel is contained. Here the Good News of Jesus will be told in terms of emptiness and fullness, famine and plenty, sadness and joy, death and life, bitterness, and hope. We hear in these pages a gospel that engages our hearts & our minds – our affections & our longings – our fears & our hopes...”

And I cannot think of any other book **in all of Scripture**, that has the ability to make a person (both) laugh and cry at the very same time!

This is a book which is both **wildly attractive** yet **tremendously tragic – painfully unpredictable** – yet **surprisingly normal** – it is a book that touches on some of the deepest **theological truths**, yet **meets us** in our day to day walks of life...

This is a book that will engage our hearts and our minds – so that in the darkest days of our lives; we may see the **hidden smile of God** in and amongst the broken pain of our lives!

The Outline of the Book

The book's outline can be neatly divided into 4 major sections (or scenes of the story):

[SLIDE]

Scene 1 – Will be: *A Sweet & Bitter Providence (1:1-22)*

Scene 2 – Will be: *A Sweet & Sovereign Encounter (2:1-23)*

Scene 3 – Will be: *A Sweet & Generous Redeemer (3:1-18)*

Scene 4 – Will be: *A Sweet & Glorious Redemption (4:1-22)*

Today's Outline

And the outline for **today's sermon** will be as follows:

[SLIDE]

In verses 1-5 we have a transition from – Life to Death

In verses 6-18 we have a transition from – Death to Life

And in verses 19-22 we have a transition from – **Sweet** to Bitter

Main Point

And the main point that I want us to see here **today** is this:

Our worst events still obtain the hidden smile of God X2

That behind **every terrible** event that occurs in our lives; there still remains the tender & fatherly smile of a God Who is working for our good and for His glory!

Our worst events still obtain the hidden smile of God because He is there in the broken mess, painting a picture of His grace...

And so please join with me as we make our way through the most beautiful **short** story **ever** written!

It was the worst of times

We begin now at scene 1 act 1: from **Life to Death**:

[SLIDE]

The author writes:

*During the time of the judges, there was a famine in the land. A man left Bethlehem in Judah with his wife and two sons to stay in the territory of Moab for a while.² The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife's name was Naomi. The names of his two sons were Mahlon (**maylon**) and Chilion (**killy-on**). They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the*

*fields of Moab and settled there. ³ Naomi's husband Elimelech died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ Her sons took Moabite women as their wives: one was named Orpah and the second was named Ruth. After they lived in Moab about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon (**maylon**) and Chilion (**killy-on**) also died, Naomi was left without her two children and without her husband.*

Although the book of Ruth has been described as a beautiful short story – there is nothing beautiful about its opening pages...

If Charles Dickens (the author of “*A Tale of 2 cities*”) were to write the opening lines to this book it would simply read:

“It was the worst of times...”

The story begins there in verse 1 with such ominous words:

“During the time of the judges...” X2

Now if you know your Old Testament Scriptures – then you would know that the time of the Judges were some of the **darkest days** in the history of Israel!

This was a time where the people of God were **completely unrestrained** in their rebellion & sin against God!

This was a time where anarchy and chaos, death and destruction, murder and rape **were simply the normal ways of life** for the people of God!

This was a time when the people of God abandoned the laws of God and everyone did what was right in his own eyes!

In fact if the book of Judges were to be made into a modern day movie – it would make our “R rated films” look like a Disney-Pixar animation!

These were dark days!

A famine in the land of bread

And this would seem to explain the famine the author draws our attention to here in verse 1:

There was a famine in the land

Now any Israelite reader who knew their Old Testament Scriptures; knew that **this famine** was **NOT** the result of some unforeseen drought or random pattern of weather – but instead

there is a theological explanation to this famine outlined in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 28...

This famine **appears to be** part of the covenant curses & blessings found in the Old Testament Scriptures of the Torah – and this famine **appears to be** part of God's **covenant mercy & wisdom** in getting the people of God **to turn away from their sin** and to come back into a right relationship with Him!

Bethlehem – House of bread

And how interesting! How interesting it is that the author names the city of Bethlehem here in verse 2...

The Word Bethlehem (in Hebrew) literally means “house of bread...” (House of food) – and so the author (**with some comic relief**) draws our attention to the fact that the house of bread (the house of food); has no bread and has no food – it is without anything hope!

The very location where the hope of the world would be born was now without hope...

And so the author **first** locates the story **chronological** (in the days of the Judges), but he also locates the story **theologically**; during the time of famine...

Elimelech's Family

And so we meet now the **characters**...

*“There was a man named Elimelech who left Bethlehem in Judah with his wife and two sons to stay in the territory of Moab **for a while**... The name of his two sons were Mahlon (**maylon**) and Chilion (**killy-on**); they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the fields of Moab **and settled there**.*

So... instead of remaining in the land of promise (with the people of God) – instead of engaging in sorrow and repentance with the people of God – Elimelech **does** what appears to be right **in his own eyes** and he leads his family **away** from the land of promise – and **into** the land of Moab!!

Elimelech...who's name literally means “*My God is my King*” is now moving away from the place where his God and His King has chosen to dwell...

And he goes into the land of Moab **and they remain there**...

Now this **doesn't** seem very significant to us, but to the original readers of the book of Ruth, this relocation would have seemed like a very strange choice...

Moab

The land of Moab has **its origins** in Genesis chapter 19 – where (if you remember) Lot gets drunk – he sleeps with his 2 daughters – and he gets them pregnant!

When the Israelite people are rescued from Egyptian slavery; it was the Moabites who hated God's people and sought to have them cursed and destroyed!

In Numbers chapter 25 – it was the Moabite women who seduced the Israelite men into sexual immorality and the worship of foreign gods...

It was the Moabite culture that would sacrifice their children in order to appease the angry and malicious gods of the earth...

Elimelech made the sensible yet fatal choice

So these were dark days; in a dark time; and this man goes to a very dark place in order to escape the judgment of God and to seek shelter & rest from the famine of God!

Settling in

And what was originally **only** supposed to be a very short visit (indicated by verse 1) has now **apparently** turned into a permanent relocation –indicated by verse 2:

*They went into the country of Moab and **remained there***

They **remained** in the land of Moab **after leaving** the land of Israel!

There's almost this gloomy undertone of a mellowing in – and a settling down into:

1. The identity
2. & The practice
3. & the lifestyle **of Pagan Gentile Moab**

Spiritual Death

And so I think the author is **very clear** here... he's trying to communicate the fact that when the **people** of God forsake the **promises** of God in order to seek **the things of the world** – it will **only ever lead** us to a place of spiritual pain, spiritual death, and spiritual destruction...

When we forsake:

1. God's people!
2. God's presence!
3. And God's promises of life!

Which is everything the land of Israel pictured! It imaged life with God – fellowship with God – hope with God!

And so when we forsake these things the author says it will **only ever lead** us to a place of **spiritual** pain, & spiritual destruction!

Physical Death

And although Elimelech appears to have escaped the judgment of God seen in verse 1 – He **cannot** escape the hand of God over life and death in verse 3:

*But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ Her sons took Moabite women as their wives: one was named Orpah and the second was named Ruth. After they lived in Moab about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon (**maylon**) and Chilion (**killy-on**) also died...”*

From bad to worse

This family goes to Moab seeking for life – but they find only death...

They go to seek comfort – but find only pain...

Elimelech (the head of the family) is the first to go – he dies within a matter of 2 short verses and then he is no more! Like all of us Elimelech simply becomes another **name** on the pages of history... He is here today & gone tomorrow!

The 2 sons marry Moabite women (even though this is forbidden in Deuteronomy chapter 7)

And before long – *both Mahlon (**maylon**) and Chilion (**killy-on**) die, as they are now simple names on the head of a gravestone...*

Loss of identity

Naomi has now lost her **home** – she has lost her **husband** – she has lost her **sons** – and if you are reading from a more **literal translation**; you'll notice Naomi has lost her **identity**!

Verse 5 in the **ESV** says:

*“And the **woman** was left...”*

She is no longer “*Naomi the Israelite*”, but simply known as “*the woman...*”

No man – no future

And I think the author here is indicating the cultural setting into which the Book of Ruth is historically set... back in these days

– a woman needed a male if she was ever going to have food, shelter and security in order to survive!

It wasn't like today; where a single woman could just go out and find work on the spot – because this was a heavily guided patriarchal society... so in this society if you did not have a father, or a husband, or a son (or some kind of male)... then you really did not have a chance of surviving!

If you did not have a man – you did not have a future – and so Naomi becomes “**the woman**” stripped of her identity!

A broken woman

She is a foreign widow – in a foreign land – with foreign gods – and foreign people – who **hate** foreign Israelites...

Her heart is broken!

Her hopes are shattered!

Her tears are unceasing!

And her grief is overwhelming!

From Moabite to Israelite

And it's at this point that Naomi becomes the main actor in Act 1 scene 2:

[SLIDE]

From Death & Life

Have a look at verse 6:

*She and her daughters-in-law set out to return from the territory of Moab, because she had heard in Moab that the Lord had paid attention to **his people's need** by providing **them** food. She left the place where she had been living, accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, and travelled along the road leading back to the land of Judah.*

Naomi's Return

So it would appear that God's judgment has been lifted – God's people have repented – and God's promises have returned to the land of Israel...

And having heard that there was no more famine in the land Naomi sets out, and begins to walk the long and lonely road of repentance and faith back toward the **covenant community of God...**

One author notes that:

“It was finally time for the prodigal daughter to come back home...”

And as she packs her bags...

And begins to walk the long dusty road back to life...

Both Orpah & Ruth have decided that they will too will come with this poor broken widow...

Mother in-law

Now **this clearly shows** that both Orpah & Ruth have only grown in their affection and love for Naomi – they have only grown in their affection and love for Naomi because she is their **mother – in law...**

How many of you, after losing a spouse would go on long dusty road, with your sad depressed sister, to live in a foreign country with your mother – in law!

Can we just be clear – probably going back to the land of death...

Probably just gonna stay, probably just gonna find another family...

But that's NOT what they do! They go with Naomi – and they accompany her on this trek!

No future hope

And as they return home – Naomi cannot bring herself to allow 2 Moabite women to live in a land that has no future hope and no future promises for 2 Gentile Pagans...

What are they going to do – where are they going to live – what are they going to eat – how are they going to survive?!?!?

These are all questions that Orpah and Ruth have failed to consider in their haste to go with Naomi!

And so Naomi decides that she's going to educate the girls – with a hard dose of reality & truth!

Verse 11:

But Naomi replied, “Return home, my daughters. Why do you want to go with me? Am I able to have any more sons who could become your husbands?”¹² Return home, my daughters. Go on, for I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me to have a husband tonight and to bear sons,¹³ would you be

willing to wait for them to grow up? Would you restrain yourselves from remarrying? No, my daughters, my life is much too bitter for you to share, because the Lord's hand has turned against me.

An ultimatum of 3

And so (with increasing force) Naomi gives 3 reasons (in verses 11-13) as to why leaving her presence and returning home to Moab is a **far better choice** than remaining with her in the land of Israel:

1. They are still young

1. Reason number one is found in verse 9:

If they go back to the land of Moab, perhaps the Lord will deal kindly with them (as they have dealt kindly with her & her family)... and perhaps they will find Moabite men – and have little Moabite kids – to live little Moabite lives!

That's the first reason they must leave!

They are still young enough to remarry and have a future back in the land of Moab!

2. I am too old

The second reason **that they must** leave is found in verse 12:

*¹²Return home, my daughters, for **I am too old to have another husband...***”

So **if** the **first** argument is that they are **still young** – the **second** argument is that **she is too old!**

So she says: even I find a man – even if I get married – even if I get pregnant – and even if I bear sons all in the span of one **night!!!** (let’s just pretend hypothetically; that impossible situation can occur)

Would you still wait for them to grow up in order to marry them?!?!

Of course **not!** – By the time they grow up, you will be just as old as I am – and you won’t even be able bear children anyway! (The maths **doesn’t** work)

So because you are **still young** – and I am **too old** – you must leave me, and you must find a future hope back in the land of Moab...

3. God's wrath is geared toward me

But then Naomi gives a third reason!

She gives a third reason and this is perhaps the most heartbreaking of all – verse 13

Thirdly! And perhaps **most painfully**:

*“No, my daughters, (do not come with me) **for** my life is much too bitter for you to share, because **the Lord's hand has turned against me.**”*

Naomi is a broken woman – and she is a bitter woman!

And she honestly believes that the primary purpose of her life is to experience the hand of the Lord going out against her!

Naomi is **so broken!** That she sees **nothing else** but the fierce hand of an angry God **targeting** her with His full wrath & vengeance!

How broken has she become in the last 10 years of her life?!?!

Do you feel like Naomi?

And as I was preparing the sermon this week, I couldn't help but think to myself:

Man isn't this the human experience of life!

That in one moment everything that was going so well for us – suddenly comes to a spectacular halt and our souls are suddenly met with the gravity of living in a broken world!

One phone call; one conversation, one letter, one email, one event – and everything **that was going so well is suddenly lost...** and our souls are met with the gravity of this fallen world...

I think Naomi knew what this was like...

And I know there are some of you sitting here today; fuming at God – bitter at God – angry at God because you (like Naomi) have experienced suffering and trial – and you truly believe that the hand of the LORD has gone out against you!

And you sit there thinking to yourself – that God has dealt bitterly with you:

- Your marriage has failed
- Your children have left
- Your Father talks down to you

- Your mother is an alcoholic
- Your bank account has declined again
- Your pantry has no food
- You just lost your job
- Your cancer has returned
- You haven't healed from the death of a loved one

And you sit there thinking – I understand what Naomi is saying... I understand what she's going through....

And you're bitter – and you're angry at God!

And the only comfort – the only comfort we have in those times is to say with the words of Elizabeth Elliot:

*“I know the One who knows... I know the One who knows and it's through the **deepest** possible suffering that God has taught us the deepest lessons of His grace...”*

*Our suffering is **never** for nothing – because... God is at work in the mess...*

If you are in Naomi's condition here this morning – brothers and sisters:

God is at work in the mess!

Keep pressing in – Keep reading on – keeping walking through because:

God is at work in the mess!

And this is one lesson that Naomi **still has to learn**... she still must learn that our worst events obtain the hidden smile (and providence) of God...

But for now... for now she is a **broken** woman and she is a **bitter** woman!

Orpah leaves

And upon hearing this – the 3 of them lifted up their voices & wept very loudly!

“And then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law Naomi, and she went back to live with her own people and with her own gods!”

It has been said of Orpah that in this one act of abandoning Naomi she has marched off the pages of the bible, never to be seen again...

But don't we just want to know! Don't we just want to know where Orpah ended up at the end of her life!

But the author does not disclose this information... he merely uses this fact to contrast the 2 different decisions that these women had made...

If Orpah was the one that walked away – Ruth was the one that clung to Naomi!

Ruth – the Israelite

And as Ruth looks into the eyes of this old – broken – bitter – heart- ravaged widow – she says some of the most memorable and hope filled words in all of the bible!

Verse 16:

She looked at Naomi and replied – *Do not plead with me to abandon you or to return and **not** follow you.*

*For wherever you go, I will go,
Wherever you live, I will live;
Your people will be my people*

*Your God will be my God.
 Where you die, I will die,
 There I will be buried.
 May the **Lord** punish me,
 and do so severely, if anything but death separates you
 and me.*

Covenant Faithfulness

Ruth uses covenant language – she uses covenant language –
 from a covenant God – in a covenant book – given to a covenant
 people!

Ruth (the Moabite) has just expressed saving faith in the God of
 Israel!

She must have been listening in those last 10 years because Ruth
 (**the Moabite**) has just used covenant keeping language – to call
 upon herself covenant curses and blessings – in order to commit
 herself to the covenant keeping God found in Scripture!

Ruth (the Moabite) looks into the eyes of Naomi and she says:

I'm not going anywhere! X2

I'm making a covenant keeping promise – to a covenant
 keeping God!

A covenant promise is a promise that can only be broken by death itself!

It's the strongest promise a human being can make to any other person –and it's the same promise between a husband and wife in the covenant bonds of marriage!

I'm not going anywhere!

This is covenant language spoken into one of the most darkened situations we can imagine...

What advantage?

And if this is not incredible enough! Let me just remind you of the situation that Ruth has just committed herself to!

Ruth is a Moabite! She is a Moabite Gentile – living with an Israelite widow in a time where people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes – and a woman's survival depended wholly upon having a man for economic success!

What hope does Ruth have by committing herself to an old widowed Jew living in the land of Israel?!?!

What hope does she have by committing herself to Naomi?!?!?

There is NOTHING for her in this relationship! There is no advantage, there are no benefits, there is no hope for a Gentile Moabite living in the land of Israel!

The kindness of Ruth toward Naomi – (at this point in time) is beyond all human comprehension!

That's the first thing...

Ruth shows **extraordinary** kindness to a very **ordinary** woman!

Naomi's description of God

But secondly, and perhaps even more stunning – is the God to whom Ruth has chosen to commit herself to!

1. Given the fact of Naomi's suffering in verses 1-5... That Ruth has also experienced!
2. Given the fact of Naomi's description that – *the hand of the LORD has gone out against her!*
3. And given the fact of Naomi's brokenness!

Why would Ruth want to commit herself to that kind of a situation?!?!?

Why would Ruth want to commit herself to Naomi's God?!?!?

Why?!?!? – Because:

God is at work in the mess! X2

Biblical Faith

Brothers and sisters this is what we call **biblical faith!**

Biblical faith is looking into the most hopeless – broken – depressing & dark situation you can ever imagine and still choosing to commit yourself to the covenant keeping God of the Bible!

Biblical faith looks into the most darkened places – the most broken scenarios – the most hopeless relationships – and still chooses to say through the **deepest possible pain:**

God is enough!

God is enough!

He is good!

He is faithful!

He is kind!

He will hold me fast!

He will not let me go!

Because:

God is at work in the mess!

Because even the **worst events** in our lives **still obtain** the hidden smile of a heavenly Father working for our good and for His glory!

This is biblical faith!

From Sweet To Bitter

And when Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped talking and they left.

And this leads us into our final point here today – Act 1 scene 3:

[SLIDE]

*From **sweet** to **bitter***

Verse 19:

The two of them travelled until they came to Bethlehem. When they entered Bethlehem, the whole town was excited about their arrival and the local women exclaimed, “Can this be Naomi?”²⁰ “Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara,” she answered, “for the Almighty has made me very bitter.²¹ I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has opposed me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?”

The Bitter One

One author describes the return of Ruth and Naomi as being:

“The return of storm battered ships limping back into the harbor...”

They were weary...

In fact, so battered, and so beat up, were these 2 women – that Naomi had **almost become...**unrecognizable! – Verse 19 the women of the city look at her and they say:

“Can this be Naomi?”

“Is this, the sweet one?”

“Is this really the one who’s name means pleasant?”

Finally Naomi snaps! She snaps – She can’t bear to hear that name any longer!

That name makes her physically sick – that name makes her physically ill!

She knows **that’s not** who she is!

She knows that’s not what she’s become!

And so she demands a change of identity that reflects the spiritual condition & the state of her soul:

Call me Mara she says!

Call me bitter!

“For the almighty has made me very bitter! I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty – I went away sweet; but I have returned bitter!”

“Call me Mara; for that is who I have become!”

Sin clouds our judgment

How incredible! How incredible to think that Naomi's **sin & suffering** had clouded her judgment so much – to the point where she could no longer **reason** or **relate** according to any kind of biblical understanding or hope!

Naomi (like us) had become so bitter (and hardened) by her **sin** that she could no longer perceive any kind of heavenly hope or Fatherly goodness in her life!

Feeling Vs. Knowing

And so in verse 22 the author contrasts the **2 different extremes** of what Naomi **feels** (what she thinks is the case) – as opposed to what is actually true (what is the case)...

So because Naomi can't think straight (because Naomi **feels** that she has returned empty) the author now describes the difference between what she actually **feels** to the truth of what is actually the case!!!

So what I mean is that:

- **One the hand** – Naomi **feels** angry at the LORD; she **feels** bitter at God for what He has done to her – **but** she has

just returned home from the land of death and entered back into life with God's people!

- **On the one hand** – Naomi **feels** broken; she **feels** hopeless in the middle of this storm – **but on the other**: she has the undying loyalty of her daughter –in law Ruth who is literally standing right there by her side! (can you imagine Ruth hearing those words fall from the lips of Naomi...

Really Naomi?!?! Empty?!?! I'm empty to you, I'm nothing to you?!?! You don't remember the covenant I made on that road?!?!

- **On the one hand** – Naomi **feels** empty – & hungry - & hopeless – & lost – but little does she know that it was just the beginning of the barely harvest in Bethlehem: **the house of bread!**

Yeah sometimes **we feel like** the hand of the Lord has gone out against us – when in reality God is using our current trial for our good and for His glory!

But Naomi's sin had blinded her to the reality of what was actually true!

How many question were racing through the mind of this old bitter woman:

- Why did God allow the famine?
- Why did God allow the suffering?
- Why does Elimelech (the man who's name means my God is my King!) why he have to die prematurely?
- And why did God think that it was okay to take away her 2 sons?!?!?
- And doesn't the heavenly Father know that they need daily bread?!?!?
- And doesn't the Father know that these Ancient Near Eastern women need husbands or at least sons to have any hope of future economic security?!?!?
- Why would God do this – why would He allow such tragic events to take place in the lives of those who love Him?!?!?

In the middle of the story

But here's the thing... sometimes when you're in the middle of the **story** – you **can't** always see the hand of God working for what's best...

When you're in the middle of the story – you can't always see what God is up to!

Sometimes when you're in the middle of the storm – you can't always see the hidden smile of a heavenly Father!

If the book of Ruth had ended right here at the end of chapter 1; there really is no hope that we would have... if the curtain simply closed at this point in the story there's really NOT a whole lot that would make a lot of sense?!?!

Conclusion

And from the perspective of the characters in this book (who are in the middle of the story) the only thing they can see; is the hand of the Lord going out against them!

As far as they are concerned the Lord had dealt **very bitterly** with Naomi; and Ruth is merely there for the ride; no ifs - no buts, just pure & simple pain in the lives of these 2 women...

But we both know that Ruth chapter 2 is still yet to come!!!

Ruth chapter 2 hasn't been revealed yet!

So at this point – in this chapter – at this moment – these girls feel broken, bitter, and beat up!

And that's precisely what the author wants us to see here **this morning...**

That is what the author wants us to feel here **today**...

The book of Ruth wants us to **feel the pain** of the characters in the story because **we feel this pain** in the everyday of our broken lives!

The book of Ruth wants us to **see the pain** of these characters in the story because **we see this pain** in the mess of our stormy trials!

It wants you to feel the mess of the characters – because we feel this mess sitting here this morning...

For the everyday Christian

Friends the book of Ruth has no miracles, no resurrections, no divine healings and **barely any mention of the goodness of God**... and that's precisely what the author wants us to see!

The author wants us to see God working through the ordinary (boring) mundane-ness of our everyday lives...

The book of Ruth is for the everyday mum raising her kids in the fear of the Lord, and yet still feeling troubled by the **lack** of her own **godliness** and **spiritual maturity**...

The book of Ruth is for the everyday Father who leads his family well – yet still snaps at his wife and kids for nothing they have done wrong!

The book of Ruth is for the everyday student, who doesn't see God's hand in the bullying – not having any friends – or anyone to talk to at lunch...

The book of Ruth is for the everyday Christian, who cannot understand why God **does** the things that He **does**... why He **allows** the things He **allows**... why He **orchestrates** the things that He **orchestrates** –

It is for those of you in here this morning who feel themselves that the hand of the LORD has dealt very bitterly with you!

And although Naomi believes that God has dealt bitterly with her; you and I both know, that the story has only just begun... When you're in the middle of the story – you **can't** always see the hidden smile of the LORD...

Naomi has no idea what is about to happen in the following scenes of the book because she's still in the story!

She's in the middle of the storm blinded by sin, and the bitterness of her own heart!

And what Naomi perceives as the hand of the Lord going out against her – is (as you and I will soon see) a tender and fatherly smile that will get her attention and bring her back to repentance and faith!

Is God getting your attention?

And could it be (brothers and sisters) that the events happening in **your life** right now, those events that appear to be the hand of the Lord going out against you...could it be that those events are in fact the hidden smile of God, in getting your attention and bringing you back to repentance and faith in Him!

Sometimes when you're in the middle of the story – you can't always see what God is doing in your life...

Spurgeon Quote

Charles Spurgeon (the English preacher) has this great quote I always love reading and now I get to quote it here in a sermon...

Spurgeon – just a brilliant man of God, did absolutely amazing things in his time here on earth – but again a man who understood suffering and pain: he wrestled with clinical

depression. He was out of his pulpit for months on end because he was unable to get out of bed. His wife struggled with all sorts of maladies where she couldn't handle the cold in London. She was constantly sick, and in bed herself...

His church ended up booting him, he was constantly getting slandered and maligned from other Christians... In fact on the evening of October 19, 1856, Spurgeon was to commence the weekly services at the Royal Surrey Gardens Music Hall with 12 thousand people inside the building and 10 thousand people outside the building – when a group of young pranksters yelled out:

“Fire! The building is about to collapse, everyone run!”

And so in the ensuing panic – 12 thousand people began to frantically exit the building when 7 people died and 28 were seriously injured and hospitalized...

Spurgeon had to be physically carried from the pulpit and taken to a friend's house where he remained in deep and dark depression for several days...

... And Spurgeon has this great quote where he says:

[SLIDE]

“God is too good to be unkind. He is too wise to be confused. If I cannot trace his hand, I can always trust his heart.” X2

Look right at me! Don't lose heart. Keep reading! Keep pressing into God! Keep reading; keep walking; keep fellowshiping with others!

God is at work in the mess.

If you cannot trace His hand, you **can always** trust His heart!

God is there, He is at work! He is providentially working; He is smiling; He is comforting! He is convicting and He is bringing you back to faith in Him!

Our suffering is never for nothing!

Brothers and sisters – God is at work in the mess!

Let's Pray.

Ruth 1:1-22

Discussion Questions

Main Point: *Our worst events still obtain the hidden smile of God.*

Q1. As you read verses 1-5 – What are some things that stand out to you as interesting or odd?

Q2. In what period of time does the book of Ruth take place? Why is this period significant for us to know?

Q3. What do you know about the period of the judges? Was this a good or bad time for Israel? (Read Judges 21:25).

Q4. What do you make of the famine in verse 1? Is every famine experienced in the world a sign of God's judgment for sin? (Read Leviticus 26:3–4; Deuteronomy 28:1-6).

Q5. What associations does Moab have in the bible? (Read Genesis 19:30-38; Deuteronomy 23:3-6; Judges 3:12-14).

Q6. The 'land' is the promised land of the covenant promises given to Abraham. By whom are those covenant promises fulfilled? (Read 2 Corinthians 1:20; Galatians 3:8) – When we

read about returning to ‘the land’; how does the New Testament encourage us to understand that today?

Q7. Do you think its significant that Elimelech’s family left Israel to sojourn to Moab (verse 1) but ended up remaining there (verse 2)? What do you think the author is saying?

Q8. Do you think Orpah made the right or wrong choice by returning to Moab (verses 14-15) – Why or why not?

Q9. Was Naomi right to tell Orpah & Ruth to return home to the land of Moab? – Why or why not?

Q10. How would the covenant commitment of Ruth in verses 16-17 have made Naomi feel? How would it have made you feel? What does this teach us about Ruth’s faith?

Q11. Was Naomi right or wrong to be bitter toward God? (Verses 13; 20-21). Is there ever a time when bitterness toward God is okay?

Q12. What does Naomi’s reaction in verses 20-21 tell us about the nature of sin and the effects it has on people’s hearts?

Application Questions

Q1. When things become tough in the Christian life, what is it about Moab (what Moab stands for) that becomes so attractive? Be honest.

Q2. How does Ruth chapter 1 relate to your life? What is the worst trial you have experienced and how has God used it for your good and His glory?

Q3. In what ways is it costly for you to turn away from 'Moab' at this stage in your life?

Q4. What are some things that have helped you through long periods of suffering?

Q5. What are some ways we can help others struggling with bitterness and anger toward God?

Q6. How does Ruth chapter 1 point us to Christ & the Gospel?

Q7. Does Ruth Chapter 1 bring you joy or sadness?

Q8. Have there been times in your life when God has used sadness and emptiness to bring you back to Christ?

Q9. Why does God allow suffering and pain in the lives of faithful Christians?

Spend some time in prayer for one another to return daily to Christ and to resist the allure of the world.

EXTRA NOTES

How sad Ruth must have felt to hear those words fall from the lips of Naomi as Ruth is now referred to as an *empty part of Naomi's life!*

A hard choice

And so Naomi now has a very hard choice to make:

Does she:

1. Repent of her sin; and go back to live with the covenant community of God?

Or

2. Does she stay in the land of Moab to die a widow's death – but she gets to escape the mebarssment escaping the judgment of forsaking God's covenant blessings?

I wonder what you would have done?

Thankfully – She makes the right choice.