

JOHN PIPER



SEX, RACE,

and the

SOVEREIGNTY

of

GOD

SWEET *and* BITTER PROVIDENCE

in the BOOK OF RUTH

*Sex, Race, and
the Sovereignty of God*

OTHER BOOKS BY JOHN PIPER

Desiring God

Don't Waste Your Life

Future Grace

God Is the Gospel

A Godward Life

A Hunger for God

Let the Nations Be Glad!

The Pleasures of God

Providence

Reading the Bible Supernaturally

The Satisfied Soul

Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ

27 Servants of Sovereign Joy

Taste and See

When I Don't Desire God

SEX, RACE,
and the
SOVEREIGNTY
of
GOD

SWEET *and* BITTER PROVIDENCE
in the BOOK OF RUTH



JOHN P I P E R

■ ■ CROSSWAY®
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Sex, Race, and the Sovereignty of God
Formerly published as *A Sweet and Bitter Providence*
Copyright © 2010, 2022 by Desiring God Foundation
Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2010

Reprinted with new title 2022

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible: English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated into any other language.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible. Public domain.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.lockman.org.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible: New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-8178-6

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-8179-3

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-8180-9

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-8181-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Piper, John, 1946–

A sweet and bitter providence : sex, race, and the
sovereignty of God / John Piper.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-1437-1 (hc)

1. Bible O.T. Ruth—Commentaries. I. Title.

BS1315.53.P67 2010

222'.3506—dc22 2009021018

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To
Noël and Talitha
women of worth

“Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for
the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.
I went away full, and the LORD has brought me
back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD
has testified against me and the Almighty
has brought calamity upon me?”

. . . Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “May he be
blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not
forsaken the living or the dead!”

RUTH 1:20–21; 2:20

CONTENTS

Introduction *11*

- 1 Sweet and Bitter Providence *17*
- 2 Under the Wings of God *53*
- 3 Strategic Righteousness *75*
- 4 May My Redeemer Be Renowned *97*

Final Appeals *127*

Acknowledgments *147*

Scripture Index *149*

Person Index *153*

Subject Index *155*

Desiring God Note on Resources *159*

INTRODUCTION

RUTH IS A VERY OLD BOOK. The events took place over three thousand years ago. Could it be relevant and helpful for your life? I think so. The sovereignty of God, the sexual nature of man, and the gospel never change. And since God is still sovereign, and you are male or female, and Christ is alive and powerful, the book has a message for you.

I don't know you or your circumstances well enough to say for sure that you should read this book. You must decide. To be sure, there are other things to do that are just as important—like telling your neighbor about Jesus. So let me simply tell you why I think you might be helped if you join me in listening to the message of Ruth. I'll make these seven reasons brief, so you can decide and be on your way or stay.

The Word of God

First, the book of Ruth is part of the Scriptures, which Jesus loved. He said, "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). He said, "Until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law [a reference

to the Scriptures] until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18). And best of all he said, “The Scriptures . . . bear witness about me” (John 5:39).

The reason these Scriptures—including Ruth—cannot be broken is that they are God’s word. “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). “Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). Therefore, the message of Ruth is unwaveringly true. It’s a rock to stand on when the terrain of ideas feels like quicksand. It’s an anchor to hold us when tides are ripping.

But the best thing about the Scriptures is that they give hope, because they point to Jesus Christ. They were “written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). The message of Ruth is filled with God-inspired hope.

A Love Story

Second, Ruth is a love story. One commentary suggests that it may be “the most beautiful short story ever written.”¹ There are some heart-stopping moments. Not often do we get the richest and deepest truth in the form of a passionate love story. The way Ruth and Boaz find each

¹F. B. Huey, *Ruth, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 3, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 509.

other is the stuff of epics. It involves God's sovereign rule over nations and reaches across thousands of years in its purpose. But the story is the flesh-and-blood experience of one family living the unexpected plan of God.

Manhood and Womanhood

Third, the book of Ruth is the portrait of beautiful, noble manhood and womanhood. The greatness of manhood and womanhood is more than sex. It is more than a throbbing love story. In a day when movies and television and advertising and the Internet portray masculinity and femininity in the lowest ways, we are in great need of stories that elevate the magnificent meaning of manhood and womanhood.

In making sex the main thing, and in flattering or reversing the differences between men and women, the modern world is losing the glory and beauty and depth and power of what sexuality becomes when it runs like a deep and mighty river between the high banks of righteousness. Ruth and Boaz are extraordinary. Men and women today need heroes like this.

Ethnocentrism

Fourth, the story of Ruth addresses one of the great issues of our time: racial and ethnic diversity and harmony.

INTRODUCTION

Racism and all manner of ethnocentrism are as common today around the world as they ever have been. The shrinking of the planet into immediate access on the Internet has brought thousands of strange people and strange patterns of life into our lives—and put our strangeness into their lives. Diversity is a given in this world. The question is how we will think and feel and act about it.

Consider a few facts from the U. S. Census Bureau about what is in store for America:

Between 2010 and 2020 the percentage of those Americans who reported their race as white only (no mixture) fell by 8.6%. In that same period, the “multiracial population” increased from 9 million to 33.8 million, a 276% increase. The Hispanic or Latino population increased by 23% in that same decade. One summary describes the future like this: “The new statistics project that the nation will become ‘minority white’ in 2045. During that year, whites will comprise 49.7 percent of the population in contrast to 24.6 percent for Hispanics, 13.1 percent for blacks, 7.9 percent for Asians, and 3.8 percent for multiracial populations.”²

² “Improved Race and Ethnicity Measures Reveal U.S. Population Is Much More Multiracial,” United States Census Bureau website, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://www.census.gov>; and “The US Will Become ‘Minority White’ in 2045, Census Projects,” Brookings website, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu>.

Ruth is an “unclean” pagan Moabitess. But she is drawn into faith and into the lineage of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Her marriage is an interracial marriage. There are lessons here that we need as much today as ever.

The Sovereignty of God

Fifth, the most prominent purpose of the book of Ruth is to bring the calamities and sorrows of life under the sway of God’s providence and show us that God’s purposes are good. It is not a false statement when Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, says, “The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. . . . The Almighty has brought calamity upon me” (Ruth 1:20–21).

That is true. But here’s the question the book answers: *Is God’s bitter providence the last word?* Are bitter ingredients (like vanilla extract) put in the mixer to make the cake taste bad? Everywhere I look in the world today, whether near or far, the issue for real people in real life is, *Can I trust and love the God who has dealt me this painful hand in life?* That is the question the book of Ruth intends to answer.³

³ To see how the whole Bible answers this question, see John Piper, *Providence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

Risk-Taking Love

Sixth, the gift of hope in God's providence is meant to overflow in radical acts of love for hurting people. The book of Ruth is not in the Bible merely to help us think right thoughts about God. Nor merely to give us hope in his good providence. That hope-filled confidence is meant to release radical, risk-taking love. It's there to make you a new kind of person—a person who is able “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8).

The Glory of Christ

Seventh, the book of Ruth aims to show that all of history, even its darkest hours, serves to magnify the glory of God's grace. In surprising ways, a thousand years before Christ, this book glorifies his saving work on the cross, as we will see. Ruth is about the work of God in the darkest of times to prepare the world for the glories of Jesus Christ.

I invite you to join me as we walk together through this amazing story.

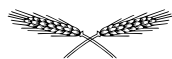
CHAPTER ONE

SWEET AND BITTER
PROVIDENCE

*Where you go I will go, and where you lodge
I will lodge. Your people shall be my people,
and your God my God. Where you die I will die,
and there will I be buried.*

*May the LORD do so to me and more also
if anything but death parts me from you.*

RUTH 1:16-17



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. ² 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. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, ⁵ and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. ⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹ The LORD

grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. ¹⁰ And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, ¹³ 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 the LORD has gone out against me." ¹⁴ Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But 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. ¹⁷ 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."

18 And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?" 20 She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. 21 I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"

22 So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. (Ruth 1)

The Prostitute and the Moabite

According to the first verse of the book of Ruth, the story took place during the time of the judges. That's why Ruth comes right after the book called *Judges* in our Bibles. The time of the judges was a four-hundred-year period after Israel entered the Promised Land under the

leadership of Joshua and before there were any kings in Israel (roughly 1400 B.C. to 1000 B.C.).

Although some generations may be left out of the genealogy in Ruth 4:18–22, Boaz, who marries Ruth, is linked as a descendant from Rahab, the converted prostitute who lived when Israel first came into the Promised Land (Josh. 2:1, 3; 6:17, 23). We learn this from the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:5. This signals to us that remarkable things are in the offing. Why would a prostitute and a Moabitess be mentioned back-to-back in the genealogy of Jesus? Why would they be mentioned at all? We are getting in at the ground level of something amazing.

God at Work in the Worst of Times

You can see from the last verse of the book of Judges what sort of period it was. Judges 21:25 says, “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” It was a very dark time in Israel. The same gloomy pattern happened again and again: the people would sin, God would send enemies against them, the people would cry for help, and God would mercifully raise up a judge to deliver them (Judg. 2:16–19).

From all outward appearances, God’s purposes for

righteousness and glory in Israel were failing. But what the book of Ruth does for us is give us a glimpse into the hidden work of God during the worst of times.

Consider the last verse of Ruth (4:22). The child born to Ruth and Boaz during the period of the judges is Obed. Obed becomes the father of Jesse, and Jesse becomes the father of David who led Israel to her greatest heights of glory. One of the main messages of this little book is that God is at work in the worst of times.

Putting in Place the Ancestry of Christ

Even through the sins of his people, God plots for their glory. It was true at the national level. And we will see that it is true at the personal, family level too. God is at work in the worst of times. He is at work doing a thousand things no one can see but him. In the case of this story, God is at work preparing the way for Christ in a manner no one can see.¹ The reason we know it is because the book ends by connecting Ruth and Boaz with David the king. The last words of the book are “Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David” (4:21–22).

¹For a more extended treatment on how God throughout the Bible plots the good of his people even through their sins, see John Piper, *Spectacular Sins: And Their Global Purpose for the Glory of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

Jesus identified himself as “the son of David” (Matt. 22:41–46). He forged a link straight from himself, over all the intervening generations, to David and Jesse and Obed and Ruth. Knowing how this book ends gives us a sense, as we begin, that nothing will be insignificant here. Huge things are at stake. God is putting in place the ancestry of Jesus the Messiah, whose kingdom will endure forever (Isa. 9:7).

Behind a Frowning Providence

As a means to that end—and everything is a means to glorifying Christ—the book of Ruth reveals the hidden hand of God in the bitter experiences of his people. The point of this book is not just that God is preparing the way for the coming of the King of Glory, but that he is doing it in such a way that all of us should learn that the worst of times are not wasted. They are not wasted globally, historically, or personally.

When you think he is farthest from you, or has even turned against you, the truth is that as you cling to him, he is laying foundation stones of greater happiness in your life.

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;*

*Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*²

What William Cowper says in these lines is a description of how God brings about the eternal salvation of his people. It's the way he governs history, and it is the way he governs our lives. The book of Ruth is one of the most graphic stories of how God hides his smiling face behind a frowning providence.

The Miseries of Naomi

Verses 1–5 describe the misery of Naomi—the frowning providence, as we will see. Naomi is one of the three main characters in this drama. She will become the mother-in-law of Ruth. She is an Israelite with her husband Elimelech and two sons Mahlon and Chilion. They are from Bethlehem where we know Jesus will be born one day—which raises our awareness again of how explosive this book is with connections to the Messiah.

Naomi, not her husband or sons or Ruth, is the focus of the first chapter of Ruth. This chapter is about her miseries—her bitter providence. The first misery (1:1) is a famine in Judah where Naomi and her husband Elimelech and her sons live. Naomi knows who causes

²William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” (1774).

famines. God does. Perhaps she learned this from the Scriptures, which say in Leviticus 26:3–4, “If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase.” In other words, God rules the rain. When the rains are withheld, this is the hard hand of God.

Is This Blasphemous or Comforting?

Please know that I am aware of how unacceptable this truth is to some. That horrific suffering serves God’s purposes is not seen as good news by many. Flesh-and-blood calamities, like the tsunami of December 2004, are so devastating in the human agony they cause that many Christians cannot ascribe them to the plan of God. For example, David Hart wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*,

When confronted by the sheer savage immensity of worldly suffering—when we see the entire littoral rim of the Indian Ocean strewn with tens of thousands of corpses, a third of them children’s—no Christian is licensed to utter odious banalities about God’s inscrutable counsels or blasphemous suggestions that all this mysteriously serves God’s good ends.³

³David B. Hart, “Tremors of Doubt,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 31, 2004, accessed 12-3-08, <http://opinionjournal.com>.

These are strong words. And I strongly disagree with them. It is the message of the book of Ruth, as we will see, that all things mysteriously serve God's good ends. Thousands of Christians who have walked through fire and have seen horrors embrace God's control of all things as the comfort and hope of their lives. It is not comforting or hopeful in their pain to tell them that God is not in control. Giving Satan the decisive control or ascribing pain to chance is not true or helpful. When the world is crashing in, we need assurance that God reigns over it all.

I write these things because they are true. I also write them because after thirty-five years of ministering to real people, I know they are precious to those who suffer. The people who most cherish the sovereignty of God in suffering are those exposed to the greatest dangers.

A Sovereign Bullet

For example, on April 20, 2001, the Peruvian Air Force shot down a missionary plane, mistaking it for a drug courier. In the plane were the pilot Kevin Donaldson and a missionary family, Jim and Veronica Bowers and their two children, seven-month-old Charity and six-year-old Cory. Veronica had Charity in her lap sitting in the back

of the Cessna 185. As the bullets sprayed the plane, one of them entered Veronica's back and passed through her and into her daughter. Both died. The pilot, with shattered knees, crash-landed the plane in a river, and the other three survived.

Seven days later at the memorial service in Fruitport, Michigan, Jim Bowers gave his testimony and explained why the sovereignty of God in the deaths of his wife and daughter was the rock under his feet.

Most of all I want to thank God. He's a sovereign God. I'm finding that out more now. . . . Some of you might ask, "Why thank God?" . . . 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.⁴

He goes on to give fifteen reasons. In that context, he says, "Roni and Charity were instantly killed by the same bullet. (Would you say that's a stray bullet?) And it didn't reach Kevin, who was right in front of Charity; it stayed in Charity. That was a sovereign bullet."

But what about the Peruvian fighter pilots? Didn't they have wills? Didn't they make mistakes or, per-

⁴Quoted from an online transcript of Jim Bowers's message. Accessed 5-1-09; www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

haps, even sin against an innocent missionary family? Jim Bowers said, “Those 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.”⁵

We will see from the story of Ruth and from the cross of Christ that in this life our hope in the next depends on God’s reign over all things. It may be hard to embrace when the pain is great, but far worse would be the weakness of God and his inability to stop the blowing of the wind and the flight of a bullet.

The Parallels with Joseph and Egypt

Naomi knew that God ruled the rain and, therefore, the famine. This was implicit in the Scriptures. Or she may have learned it from the story of Joseph. In fact, there are some striking parallels between Naomi’s circumstances and Joseph’s. Joseph, the son of Jacob, was sold into slavery in Egypt by his own brothers (Genesis 37:28). In the end, this would prove to be the salvation of the very brothers who sold him. Indeed, it would save

⁵Ibid.

the entire people of Israel—and preserve the ancestral line of the Messiah. A famine struck the land of Israel, and Joseph proved to be the one who provided food for his family.

The parallels in Naomi's situation are that she was taken to a foreign land and that a famine threatened her life and the life of God's people and the ancestral line of the Messiah was preserved in a way no one would have dreamed—a Moabite woman became the ancestor of the Son of God.

The point I am focusing on here is that Naomi knew that famines were from God. Psalm 105:16–17 describes God's action in connection with Joseph's sale into Egypt and the famine that came. It says that God “summoned” the famine and that God had “sent” Joseph. In other words, the famine and the rescue from famine were planned by God. The psalm says, “When [God] summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave.”

This is what Naomi believed about the famine of her own day. It was of God. This is going to be very important in deciding whether she is right when she says later in this chapter, “The Almighty has brought calamity upon me” (Ruth 1:21).

Playing with Fire

After we learn that there is a famine in Israel, we see the family leaving Israel and going to Moab to escape the famine. Moab is a pagan land with foreign gods (Ruth 1:15; Judg. 10:6). Going to Moab was playing with fire. God had called his people to be separate from the surrounding lands. So when Naomi's husband dies (Ruth 1:3), what could she feel but that the judgment of God had followed her and added grief to famine? "The hand of the LORD has gone out against me" (1:13).

Then her two sons take Moabite wives, one named Orpah, the other named Ruth (1:4). And again the hand of God falls. Verse 5 sums up Naomi's tragedy after ten years of childless marriages: "Both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband." A famine, a move to pagan Moab, the death of her husband, the marriage of her sons to foreign wives, ten years of apparent childlessness for both of her daughters-in-law, and the death of her sons—blow after blow, tragedy upon tragedy. Now what?

"The Hand of the LORD Has Gone Out against Me"

In verse 6, Naomi gets word that "the LORD had visited his people and given them food." So she decides to return

to Judah. Her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, go with her, partway it seems, but then in verses 8–13 she tries to persuade them to go back home. I think there are three reasons why the writer devotes so much space to Naomi’s effort to turn Ruth and Orpah back.

First, the scene emphasizes Naomi’s misery. For example, verse 11: “But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?”” In other words, Naomi has nothing to offer them. Her condition is worse than theirs. If they try to be faithful to her and to the name of their husbands, they will find nothing but pain. So she concludes at the end of verse 13, “No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” In other words, *Don’t come with me because God is against me. Your life may become as bitter as mine.*

The Strange Custom of Marrying Kinsmen

The second reason for verses 8–13 is to prepare us for a custom in Israel that is going to turn everything around for Naomi in the following chapters. The custom was that when an Israelite husband died, his brother or near relative was to marry the widow and preserve the

brother's name (Deut. 25:5–10). Naomi is referring to this custom (in Ruth 1:11) when she says she has no sons to marry Ruth and Orpah. She thinks it is hopeless for Ruth and Orpah to remain committed to the family name. She doesn't remember, evidently, that there is another relative named Boaz who might perform the duty of a brother.

There's a lesson here. When we have decided that God is against us, we usually exaggerate our hopelessness. We become so bitter we can't see the rays of light peeping out around the clouds. It was God who broke the famine and opened the way home (1:6). It was God who preserved a kinsman to continue Naomi's line (2:20). And it was God who constrains Ruth to stay with Naomi. But Naomi is so embittered by God's hard providence that she doesn't see his mercy at work in her life.

“Your God Will Be My God”

The third reason for verses 8–13 is to make Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi appear amazing. Verse 14 says that Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. Not even another entreaty in verse 15 can get Ruth to leave: “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and

to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” No. She will stay. This is all the more amazing after Naomi’s grim description of their future with her. Ruth is still young (2:5; 4:12). Nevertheless, she stays with Naomi in spite of an apparent future of widowhood and childlessness. Naomi painted the future very dark, and Ruth took her hand and walked into it with her.

The amazing words of Ruth are found in 1:16–17,

Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.

The more you ponder these words, the more amazing they become. Ruth’s commitment to her destitute mother-in-law is simply astonishing.

First, it means leaving her own family and land. Second, it means, as far as she knows, a life of widowhood and childlessness, because Naomi has no man to give her, and if she married a non-relative, Ruth’s commitment to Naomi’s family would be lost. Third, it means going to an unknown land with a new people and

new customs and new language. Fourth, it was a commitment even more radical than marriage: “Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried” (1:17). In other words, she will never return home, not even if Naomi dies.

But the most amazing commitment of all is this: “Your God [will be] my God” (1:16). Naomi has just said in verse 13, “The hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” Naomi’s experience of God was bitterness. But in spite of this, Ruth forsakes her religious heritage and makes the God of Israel her God. Perhaps she had made that commitment years before, when her husband told her of the great love of God for Israel and his power at the Red Sea and his glorious purpose of peace and righteousness. Somehow or other, Ruth had come to trust in Naomi’s God in spite of Naomi’s bitter experiences.

“She Laughs at the Time to Come”

Here we have a picture of God’s ideal woman—and we will see more of her quality later. Faith in God that sees beyond present bitter setbacks. Freedom from the securities and comforts of the world. Courage to venture into the unknown and the strange. Radical commitment

in the relationships appointed by God. This is the woman of Proverbs 31:25 who looks into the future with confidence in God and laughs at the coming troubles: “Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.” Ruth is one of “the holy women who hoped in God . . . [and did] not fear anything that is frightening” (1 Pet. 3:5–6).

It is a beautiful thing to watch a woman like this serve Christ with courage. I have been able to do it up close, especially in recent years, since my wife Noël is freer to travel than when she was raising four boys. Now, with only our teenage daughter Talitha at home, Noël will travel around the world for the cause of missions and for the care of people with disabilities. If she can, she simply takes Talitha along. If not, Talitha and I make do at home.

Noël seems fearless to me in the way she ventures into difficult places. When we moved into Phillips Neighborhood in south Minneapolis—the kind of neighborhood where you don’t homestead a house for investment purposes—she never batted an eye. This is where we have lived for almost thirty years. Urban stories could be told, but there would be none about my wife’s fear. She is Ruth-like. And with a prayer and

dream, “Ruth” is Talitha’s middle name. O that all our churches might breed Ruth-like women!

“Call Me *Mara*”

So Ruth and Naomi return together to Bethlehem in Judah. “And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’” (Ruth 1:19). That is a painful question not only because they see that she is older and with no husband and no sons, but also because the name *Naomi* means “pleasant” or “sweet.” So she responds,

Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me? (Ruth 1:20–21)

What do you make of Naomi’s theology?

At Least She Makes No Excuses for God

I would take Naomi’s theology any day over the sentimental views of God that permeate so many churches today. Endless excuses are made for God’s sovereignty.

Naomi is unshaken and sure about three things: God exists, God is sovereign, and God has afflicted her.

The problem with Naomi is that the story of Joseph has not gotten into her bones. We mentioned that story earlier. Joseph too went into a foreign country. He was sold as a slave. He was framed by an adulteress and put in prison. He had every reason to say, with Naomi, “The Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.” But he was never embittered against God. God turned it all for Joseph’s personal good and for Israel’s national good.

The key lesson in Genesis 50:20 is this: “As for you [Joseph says to his brothers], you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” Naomi is right to believe in a sovereign, almighty God who governs the affairs of nations and families—and gives each day its part of pain and pleasure, as the old Swedish hymn says.⁶ But she needs to open her eyes—the eyes of her heart—to the signs of his merciful purposes.

⁶Karolina W. Sandell-Berg, “Day by Day” (1865):
*Day by day, and with each passing moment,
 Strength I find, to meet my trials here;
 Trusting in my Father’s wise bestowment,
 I’ve no cause for worry or for fear.*

*He whose heart is kind beyond all measure,
 Gives unto each day what He deems best—
 Lovingly, its part of pain and pleasure,
 Mingling toil with peace and rest.*

Embittered Eyes Become Blind

It was God who took away the famine and opened a way home. Naomi “had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food” (Ruth 1:6). Just as surely as God brought the famine, God took it away. Naomi could see that. But she could not see all that God was doing. Later she will be able to look back, in the same way we can when we read the book a second time, and see the pointers of hope.

For example, notice the delicate touch of hope at the end of 1:22: “And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.” If Naomi could only see what this is going to mean. The barley field is where Ruth will meet Boaz, her future husband.

Not only that, Naomi needs to open her eyes to Ruth. What a gift! What a blessing! Yet as she and Ruth stand before the people of Bethlehem, Naomi says in verse 21, “The LORD has brought me back empty.” Not so, Naomi! You are so weary with the night of adversity that you can’t see the dawn of rejoicing.

It may help at his point to give a personal testimony from John Knight. John is a senior director at Desiring God.⁷ He has known what it is like to be treated as

⁷See www.desiringGod.org.

Naomi was and to respond the way Naomi did. He also gives us a glimpse of how God mercifully and patiently leads his people out of the blindness of bitterness. The following was a birthday letter⁸ to his son Paul who is blind and autistic.

The 4th of July is a different sort of “Independence Day” for me. On July 4, 1995, my multiply disabled son entered the world, and my life came crashing down around me—and would soon include a deep and intense bitterness toward God.

I never denied that God existed or is powerful; I concluded he was mean and capricious. But it also began God’s work of creating an affection for him and for the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. I am often astonished, when thinking back, that I am now able to praise God for his goodness in giving my son his autism and blindness.

None of this happened easily or by accident. I can point to five specific things that God brought to bear on my life:

1. Faithful pastoral leadership. I can still remember Pastor Tom Steller . . . walking up my front steps with a note from Pastor John. And I remember sitting with and emailing Pastor David Michael.

These men, with great courage and biblical conviction, entered into dangerous territory. My attorney, a

⁸Available online at <http://www.desiringgod.org>.

man trained in conflict, said that my intensity and bitterness frightened him. But my pastors never wavered from bringing a message of hope and absolute certainty in the sovereignty and goodness of God, even when I pushed them away.

2. Faithful people of Bethlehem Baptist Church. Shortly after my son was born, we dropped everything at church—our small group, volunteering, Sunday school class, and attendance. One couple refused to let us go and loved us with a gracious, firm, consistent tenderness that made me want to understand how they could love someone like me, my wife, or my son so completely.

3. A faithful father. My own father was the first person in the world to understand and communicate my son's value and inherent worth as a creation of a good and loving God to me. Through 13 years, he has stood with me through much pain and sorrow—and joy.

4. A faithful wife. My wife and I have not walked the same path; hers has been much harder than mine for many reasons. But by the grace of God, we are together, and I thank God every day for this woman whose spine is made of steel and who loves me and our four children.

5. The sovereignty of God as revealed in his word. I remember a particularly heartbroken, bitter email I sent to Pastor John. He had every right

to discipline me, but instead wrapped the words of the Bible around my heart. God used those words from the Bible, among many others, to create longings I didn't have, to start a dead heart beating, and to reveal, when I was incapable of seeing, the beauty, sufficiency, and majesty of Jesus Christ and his cross.

God has done it all, and it was his word that proved decisive.

Living with a boy, now a teenager no less, who will always be dependent on someone for all his needs is hard. I have a daily, often hourly, fight for joy in my salvation. Yet, through my oldest son's daily care, through my youngest son's premature birth, and now through my wife's ongoing battle with metastatic cancer, God is not just sustaining me, but revealing more of his goodness because he is sovereign over all these things, for his glory and my good.

So, on this Independence Day, I am grateful to Jesus for my real freedom in him and for giving me my boy to help me see it: So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36).

Happy birthday, Paul.

Seeing is a precious gift. And bitterness is a powerful blindness. What would Naomi say if she could see only a fraction of the thousands of things God was doing in the bitter providences of her life? For example, what if

she knew that God was choosing an “unclean” outsider, a Moabite—just as he chose Rahab the prostitute (Matt. 1:5; Josh. 2:1) and Tamar who played the prostitute (Matt. 1:3; Gen. 38:15)—as the kind of person he wanted in the bloodline of his Son, so that no one could boast in Jewishness—or any other ethnicity? What if she knew that part of what God was doing was shaping a genealogy for the Messiah that would humble the world?

What if she could see that in Ruth she would gain a man-child, and that this man-child would be the grandfather of the greatest king of Israel, and that this king of Israel would be the ancestor of the King of kings, Jesus Christ, the Lord of the universe? If she had trusted God that such things were in the offing, she may have said,

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*⁹

So the chapter ends with Naomi full of sorrow and with the horizon brightening with hope.

⁹Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”

Let's draw together some of the lessons of this chapter.

1. God's Sovereign Rule

Naomi got this much right. God the Almighty reigns in all the affairs of men. He rules the affairs of nations (Dan. 2:21) and the flight of birds (Matt. 10:29). His providence extends from the U.S. Congress to your kitchen. Whatever else the great women of faith doubted, they never doubted that God governed every part of their lives and that none could stay his hand (Dan. 4:35).

He gives rain, and he takes rain (Job 38:26; Ps. 147:8). He gives life, and he takes life (Job 1:21). He governs the roll of dice (Prov. 16:33) and the rise of kings (Dan. 2:21). Nothing—from toothpicks to tyrants—is ultimately self-determining. Everything serves (willingly or not) “the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). God is the all-encompassing, all-pervading, all-governing reality.

Naomi was right, and we should join her in this conviction. God the Almighty reigns in all the affairs of men.

2. God's Mysterious Providence

God's providence is sometimes very hard. It's true, God had dealt bitterly with Naomi—at least in the short run, it could only feel like bitterness. Perhaps someone will say, "It was all owing to the sin of going to Moab and marrying foreign wives." Maybe so. But not necessarily.

Psalm 34:19 says, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all." Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament promises that believers will escape affliction in this life. "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator" (1 Pet. 4:19). The one who suffered most deserved it least: Jesus Christ. There is no sure connection between our suffering and our behavior. It is not at all certain, therefore, that Naomi's affliction was owing to God's displeasure with her.

But suppose Naomi's calamity was owing to her disobedience. That makes the story doubly encouraging because it shows that God is willing and able even to turn his judgments into joys. If Ruth was brought into the family by sin, it is doubly astonishing that she is

made the grandmother of David and ancestor of Jesus Christ. Don't ever think that the sin of your past means there is no hope for your future.

3. God's Good Purposes

That leads to the third lesson. Not only does God reign in all the affairs of men, and not only is his providence sometimes hard, but in all his works his purposes are for the good and the greater happiness of his people. Who would have imagined that in the worst of all times—the period of the judges—God was quietly moving in the tragedies of a single family to prepare the way for the greatest king of Israel?

But not only that, he was working to fill Naomi and Ruth and Boaz and their friends with great joy. If anything painful has fallen on you to make your future look hopeless, learn from Ruth that God is at work for you right now to give you a future and a hope. Trust him. Wait patiently. The ominous clouds are big with mercy and will break with blessing on your head.

4. Freedom and Courage Like Ruth's

Finally, we learn that if you trust the sovereign goodness and mercy of God to pursue you all the days of your

life, then you are free for radical love like Ruth's. If God calls, you can leave family, you can leave your job, you can leave your homeland, and you can make risky commitments and undertake new ventures. Or you can find the freedom and courage and strength to keep a commitment you already made.

Mary Slessor's Courage

Mary Slessor (1848–1915) was a courageous missionary to Calabar (Nigeria). She was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, and was converted as a youth. "It was hell-fire that drove her into the Kingdom, she would sometimes say. But once there she found it to be a kingdom of love and tenderness and mercy."¹⁰

She was given a Bible, and her life changed.

Most of all it was the story of Christ that she pored over and thought about. His Divine majesty, the beauty and grace of His life, the pathos of His death on the Cross, that affected her inexpressibly. But it was His love, so strong, so tender, so pitiful, that won her heart and devotion and filled her with happiness and peace that suffused her inner life like sunshine. In return she loved Him

¹⁰W. P. Livingstone, *Mary Slessor of Calabar: Pioneer Missionary* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916), 3.

with a love so intense that it was often a pain. . . . As the years passed she surrendered herself more and more to His influence, and was ready for any duty she was called upon to do for Him, no matter how humble or exacting it might be. It was this passion of love and gratitude, this abandonment of self, this longing for service, that carried her into her life-work.¹¹

Her training for the hardships and dangers of missions was on the city streets. She volunteered as a teacher in a mission school. She and others ventured outdoor ministry and were pelted with mud and stones.

There was one gang that was resolved to break up the mission with which she had come to be identified. One night they closed in about her on the street. The leader carried a leaden weight at the end of a piece of cord, and swung it threateningly around her head. She stood her ground. Nearer and nearer the missile came. It shaved her brow. She never winced. The weight crashed to the ground. "She's game, boys," he exclaimed. To show their appreciation of her spirit they went in a body to the meeting. There her bright eyes, her sympathy, and her firmness shaped them into order and attention.¹²

¹¹Ibid., 8.

¹²Ibid., 9.

When people objected to her going to Calabar, which was called “the white man’s grave,” she would answer that “Calabar was the post of danger, and was therefore the post of honour.”¹³

The reason Mary Slessor could act with courage in the cause of Christ was that she knew herself to be secure under the wings of God. Not that she could not be killed, but that even the hand of death was the hand of Christ.

I do not like that petition in the Prayer Book, *From sudden death, good Lord, deliver us*. I never could pray it. It is surely far better to see Him at once without pain of parting or physical debility. Why should we not be like the apostle in his confident outburst of praise and assurance, “For I am persuaded . . .” [Acts 26:26]? Don’t talk about the *cold* hand of death—it is the hand of Christ.¹⁴

When you believe in the sovereignty of God and that he loves to work mightily for those who trust him, it gives a freedom and courage that isn’t abandoned in hard times. The story of Ruth—and of all the courageous women who followed her—gives us a glimpse into the hidden

¹³Ibid., 18.

¹⁴Ibid., 324.

work of God during the worst of times. And so like all the other Scriptures, as Paul says (Rom. 15:4, 13), the book of Ruth was written that we might abound in hope—and in that hope live lives of Christ-exalting courage.

5. The Glory of Christ

The ground of our love-releasing hope is not only that in the worst of times God is at work generally for our good, but also that he is working all things specifically for the glory of his Son, Jesus Christ—son of David, son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Ruth the Moabitess. We “cheated” and read the end of Ruth first. This is where it is all going (Ruth 4:21–22).

And the glory of Christ is supremely the glory of grace. And that grace was shown supremely in the cross where all our sins were covered and all God’s promises are secured. Every lasting blessing that came to Ruth and Naomi and Boaz was bought by the blood of Christ a millennium after the blessing was given. Without Christ, sin has no final remission. And where sin has no remission, guilt remains. And where guilt remains, the wrath of God remains. And where the wrath of God remains, there is no lasting blessing, but only everlasting misery.

Therefore, the very wonder of God's gracious providence to make a Moabite an ancestor of Jesus was itself made possible by the death of Jesus for that Moabite on Calvary. The blessings of Christ's blood flow backward and forward in history. "God put [Christ] forward as a propitiation by his blood . . . to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins" (Rom. 3:25). In other words, all of Ruth's sins were laid on Jesus when he died. And all of God's wrath toward her was removed. God counted her as righteous because of Christ. Christ was the ground of all the good that she received. And all of it magnifies his glory.