

**“Finding Mercy in Misery” Ruth 1, Sermon Notes**  
**Pastor Marc Wragg**  
**Saving Grace Bible Church**  
**September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017**  
**Morning Worship Service**

**Text:** Ruth Ch 1

**Title:** Finding Mercy in Misery

**Focal Point: vs 20-21** “She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. <sup>21</sup>“I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?”

**Homiletical Keyword:** Naomi

**Interrogative:** Why? (Why does Naomi react so bitterly to God’s dark providence?)

**Teaching Aim:** to demonstrate how God was at work while Naomi was spiraling down

**Introduction**

- Life can be very difficult at times

How many times in life have you thought: God how can this be your plan?

God what I am I supposed to do now?

God how can this be the best thing for me?

- There can be seasons of life which will take you very low.
  - Maybe even so low you cannot imagine how God can bring anything good out of it.
- Have you ever been in a situation where you thought it could not get any worse and it does?
- How do you respond when nothing seems to be going your way?
  - Naturally we respond by getting depressed
  - We begin to doubt God and His work
  - We doubt the decisions we made

Some of you may have experienced hurricane damage and not know what is going to happen next

Some of you may have been in difficult situations and wondered why you were there

- Like the woman who drove her niece and nephew to a park and got into an accident which killed both kids
  - Why God would you allow this to happen
  - Why am I responsible for the death of these two kids, she would think to herself

The Book of Ruth is about a woman whose life hit rock bottom

- Where God had stripped everything away leaving her with nothing to rely on
- Then God demonstrates His faithfulness to His people and she responds and turns to Him to find Her life blessed beyond her imagination

More amazingly the book of Ruth has the character of Ruth as the Second and maybe even the 3<sup>rd</sup> most important person of the book

- The book of Ruth is an ordinary story about God's providential dealings in a woman's life. An ordinary event that could happen to any person in this Church and yet recorded for us because of the historical connection to King David

Text verses 1-5

"Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons.<sup>2</sup> 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, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there.<sup>3</sup> Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons.<sup>4</sup> They took for themselves Moabite women *as* wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years.<sup>5</sup> Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband."

- The title of this book is odd. It should not be called the book of Ruth.
- It should be called the book of Naomi

The Book starts with the moving of Naomi and her family

- Then the death of her husband and finally her sons
- Naomi returns home and is followed by Ruth
- It is Naomi's kinsman redeemer who helped the Moabite Woman – Ruth in Ch 2
- Naomi who gave the plan to Ruth to take the relationship with Boaz to a more formal level in ch 3

Now notice how this book ends

- It starts with Naomi and her calamity
- It ends with Naomi and her deliverance

“So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. <sup>14</sup> Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. <sup>15</sup> "May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." <sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. <sup>17</sup> The neighbor women gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi!" So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.”  
(Ruth 4:13-17 NAU)

- This book is not about Ruth it is about Naomi

Naomi is the central character of this book

Her name is referenced 21x

Secondly Boaz is mentioned 20x

And Ruth is mentioned by name 12x in this book

The Story Begins with Naomi’s calamity and ends with Naomi’s redemption

The Story Begins with Naomi being bereft of her loved ones and ends with her nursing her grandson

The Story begins with Naomi’s poverty and ends with her riches

Naomi starts hungry and ends satisfied

When the Sun goes down, it will come up again

- When difficulty comes mercy is on its heels

This is a story of redemption. It is a story of God taking a dark providence and using it to bring about a merciful result

This is no disrespect to Ruth but Naomi is the key character of this book even though it was Ruth who was used in the most amazing way

The key to understanding the book of Ruth is keeping your eye on Naomi

Now Verses 1-5 set the stage for this whole drama. This is the back drop – Setting for the whole story – it is the description of the tension which establishes the drama of the story

Vs 1. Describes the difficulty Naomi and her family faced

- They lived in Bethlehem (later to be known as the city of David)
- The name of Bethlehem means house of bread
- They were experiencing a famine in the land

The Author of the book gives us one more insight and tells us this was during the time of the Judges vs 1

- This was before the Kings. Before Saul or David
- During the time of the reign of the Judges and before the time of Samuel
  - The Book was likely penned by the prophet Samuel
  - But the events occurred before Samuels time
- So the book then is Historical Narrative. The events are historical events told in story format to relay a particular message to us
- Now it is up to us to discover the great message of this book

The land is facing a famine and Naomi with her family are facing difficult decisions

Her husband Elimelech makes the decision to leave town and head to where the Moabites reside

- To the Jews this would have been a despicable move
- Move to their enemies
- Maybe even the cause for the greater calamity to come

This is not unlike us. We face difficult situations and we have to make decisions. These decisions will shape the course of our life and we have no idea how when we face them. I can tell you when I moved to FL I never thought I would face 4 hurricanes

Elimelech decides to move his wife and two sons to Moab to start afresh and to avoid the famine in the land

- Elimelech – the name means “My God is King” Eli = God Melech = King

Wonderful name and fitting for this period of time

Vs 2 the most important saying about this family:

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, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah

- The Author already gives us a hint at why this book is so important

“Now David was the son of the Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, whose name was Jesse, and he had eight sons. And Jesse was old in the days of Saul, advanced *in years* among men.” (1 Samuel 17:12 NAU)

- It is likely that an Ephrathite was part of the ruling family in Bethlehem
- Which would mean that Elimelech and his family fell really far down when calamity came upon them
  - Also would make sense to how many people responded to Naomi and her return later in this chapter

Now you must see the misery dealt to Naomi and her family

- When we talk about God being in control we talk about God's providence
- Providence – is God overseeing and directing his creation
- God bringing good or calamity into our lives

The two fruits of providence are misery and mercy

- God allows difficulty in our lives – James 1 gives us insight why – to test our faith – we can call this misery because it is often difficult
- God brings mercy – this is according to the need of the moment to deliver us through the hour of temptation – to help us endure

This book starts with God's dark providence on Naomi – that is the providence which leads to misery

1<sup>st</sup> Expression of Dark Providence was the famine in the land

2<sup>nd</sup> Expression of Dark Providence is seen in the death of Elimelech in verse 3

- There is no direct statement on how long after arriving his death took place but the idea is rather quickly leaving Naomi with just her two sons
- The boys grew up to each marry a Moabite woman
- The women were named Orpah and Ruth
- End of verse 4 says they lived there in Moab, implies after the marriages for 10 years

3<sup>rd</sup> Expression of Dark Providence upon Naomi is the death of her two sons

- This comes as the final blow
- Her wealth and prosperity gone
- Her husband dead
- And Now her two sons who would have been there to offer protection and provision and they too are dead.
- This is absolute bottom

You know what it is like when someone starts to have everything go wrong in their life. Others start to pull away from them. Look at verse 5

It is so bad that even the author does not call Naomi by name in verse 5. He calls her “the woman”

- This is the worst possible place a Jewish woman could find herself in
- She is living in a foreign land without her husband and sons to help provide

Have you ever been in a situation like this? You are in a difficult situation so you make a decision thinking this will help you out only to find that things get worse?

- There is no indication that God was punishing her family
- But it was also clear that the further she and her family moved away from the hand of God the harder life got for her
  - This is often the lesson we need to learn
  - *The harder things get the more we need to turn to God than our own wisdom*
    - *Maybe the answer to your problems are more worship, not new surroundings*
    - Our own wisdom may deliver us for a while but unless God is in it, there is no hope of us being delivered

This is the backdrop for the difficulties that Naomi is facing

Naomi's Response to Hitting Rock Bottom vs 6-19b

How do you respond when you hit rock bottom?

- You should respond like Naomi and turn back to a good God who will rescue

<sup>6</sup>“Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food.”

- How do you respond when you have hit rock bottom?
- Turn to God for a glimmer of hope
- That is what Naomi did. She heard God was blessing His people again
  - Maybe this was old news she held on to
  - Maybe this was a fresh bit of news she received after revealing her situation
  - Whatever it was Naomi knew she needed to return where God was and where He was blessing His people

This is where all true hope comes. People turning back to God when they have hit the bottom

- This is what God looks for: People who will turn back to Him and honor Him
- When they have tried everything in their own power and strength
- When they have thought they could do it on their own
- After they have gotten to the point where they recognize they are helpless and they can make no more demands of God

This is where God often has to bring us before He demonstrates His great work in us. He has to bring us low and empty, He has to bring us to a point where we are willing to leave all behind before He can pick us up and deliver us

- This is what has happened to Naomi

What you must see starting at this point and moving through the rest of the book, that while Providence may deal a hand of misery it will also deal a hand of mercy

- There is always mercy in the midst of misery
- There is mercy in the storm
- There is mercy manifested all around us and we need to remember it is there and we need to fix our eyes upon it. Because misery is like the rhino in the room which cannot be missed. Mercy is like the butterfly giving its gentle grace
- The rest of this book moves to God's hand of mercy on display to Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz and eventually the nation of Israel

Three expressions of Dark Providence and now we will see expressions of Mercy

1<sup>st</sup> Expression of God's Merciful Providence

- God allowing Naomi to hear of His gracious work

Too often when we are under the dark cloud of God's providence and are facing what seems like endless misery we often miss the signs which demonstrate His great love and mercy

- God starts the display of this mercy by giving a message of hope

Notice what happens next:

2<sup>nd</sup> Expression of God's Merciful Providence – two loyal companions – God does not leave us alone. He surrounds us with His people

<sup>7</sup>"So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah."

- These two women pack up and get ready to travel with her back to Bethlehem
- Notice how Naomi Responds to them:

<sup>8</sup>"And 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."<sup>9</sup>"May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband." Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.<sup>10</sup> And they said to her, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people."<sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?"<sup>12</sup> "Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons,<sup>13</sup> would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me."

Now Naomi responds to God's grace much the same way we do

- No, I do not deserve your favor
- I cannot handle the responsibility
- You should not think about me you must think about yourself
- We push against and fight against the providential grace of God in our lives
  - People come to care for us and we push them away because we do not want to burden them
  - We think we do not deserve their kindness

God in His providence has brought many families in and out of the life of Saving Grace Bible Church

- Many have come in and sat under the teaching and accountability of the Body of Christ and have left thinking it was way too much – only to look back and say wow God taught us so much in such a short period of time
- This is what happens, often we fight against the gracious providence of God only to realize it after it is gone

This is what happened to Naomi. She had two Daughter's-in-law who were loyal to her and ready to follow her to the end of the earth and Naomi responds by rejecting the mercy and grace of God

- She turns on her self-wisdom
  - Go find another husband and don't worry about me vs 8-9. Go take care of yourselves and find a new husband to be devoted to
  - When they rebuff here and deny her request she turns up the rational explanation
  - Look ladies I cannot possibly ask you to wait for me to find a husband, bear children, and have them grow up to marry you. You still have your youth so go care for yourselves and leave me to myself

This is often how we respond when we are in a dark providence. When God is dealing out His expressions of mercy we are rejecting it because we do not believe we deserve it or we do not want to see others caring for our needs

- BUT What if God wants to bless others and enrich another person's life through someone's service to you?
- What if God wants to show you that you cannot protect everyone only He can?
- What if God wants your weakness to be the vehicle to bring His grace to someone who is undeserving?
  - AKA Ruth the Moabites outside the grace of God who stays to bless Naomi only to receive a greater grace

But when the dark providence of God seems to cloud His goodness the woeful crutch of self-pity is what we tend to fall back upon

- Naomi was speaking in human wisdom
- And her human wisdom was correct
- It was just spiritually empty

And like what often happens when we turn to our natural wisdom rather than the mercy of God, God pulls back His mercy

<sup>14</sup>“And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. <sup>15</sup> Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

- Orpah – leaves
- God had supplied two women to protect and care for Naomi
- Naomi thought she was the one who was going to have to care of these women and she dreaded the responsibility
- What Naomi missed in all of her self-pity was the hand of God mercifully with her.
  - First with the death of her Husband – two sons
  - Death of her sons – two loyal daughters
  - And the promise of deliverance from a God who was helping His people

BTW later when we see in chapters 2-3 how much God supplies for Ruth and Naomi you will quickly see that God supplied more than enough to cover for all three women if necessary

- Who knows if Orpah would have stayed likely God would have supplied a Man for her to marry as well

IF God has dealt to you a merciful providence do not fight against it because you possibly are removing the opportunity for someone else to be blessed through your difficulties

Secondly, if someone is rebuffing your help press through to do what God says is right not what man thinks is right and you will always be safe

- Take the time to determine what God wants done because it is on that road you will find the mercy and grace of God
- You might be called to help someone who does not want help but press through because God may have something rich in store for you. That is the message of Ruth

<sup>16</sup>“But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you *or* turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people *shall be* my people, and your God, my God. <sup>17</sup> “Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if *anything but* death parts you and me.” <sup>18</sup> When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. <sup>19</sup> So they both went until they came to Bethlehem.”

- God is gracious to us
- Even when we fight against his merciful providence He is gracious to deliver us
- It is as if His mercy is more stubborn than we are

We fight and press against it only to find that God gives us what we need and beyond

- Even though Naomi fought against God’s mercy, and even though He pulled back half of His mercy to her, He still richly blessed her

The gift of mercy was in a loyal daughter-in-law who would go to die with her. She was going to worship the God Naomi worshipped. She was going to care for and serve Naomi no matter what

- We do not deserve the grace and mercy God gives us and when we get it in such loyal forms all we can say is "God I am unworthy."
- Clearly Naomi felt that at this point

Clearly Ruth's determination was more stubborn than Naomi's self-pity so Naomi said no more

- Clearly some irony here as Naomi who should have faith doubted and Ruth who was an outsider trusted in God and His provisions for the ladies

Naomi's understanding of her difficult circumstances 19c -22

And when they had come to Bethlehem,

60 to 75 miles to return from Moab to Bethlehem

Descend down 4500 feet to the Jordan River to have to cross over it

Ascend up another 3500 feet to Bethlehem

Once they arrived now Naomi gets to explain her circumstances

This is Naomi's insight into her difficulties. This is where we learn of her perspective in this whole drama

All the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"

- Large response indicates she was likely part of a prominent family in the town
- The whole city was stirred

As is common the difficulties of God's dark providence often cloud our perspective of God and His work. Look at how Naomi responds to God's dealings:

<sup>20</sup>"She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.<sup>21</sup> "I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

- This is where the pity comes

Noticed what happened here to Naomi – Her perception of God changed when she found herself on the misery end of God's providence

- God has dealt with me bitterly – He has treated me harshly
- I went out full – Yes she had her family but she left because they were facing poverty, they were in a famine

But the Hebrew text is stronger here. The Hebrew text says that "God or Shaddi has made me bitter."

- It is to say that Shaddi has made me bitter
- I am not pleasant anymore, I am now bitter because of God

Ruth says the Almighty has done this to me

James McKeown summing up Naomi's comments says this:

"The use of this particular name [Shaddi] conveys Naomi's depth of despair. If it is the Almighty who has dealt bitterly with her, who can come to her aid? Also by using such a name she suggests that God is powerful and able to help her but has refused to do so. Naomi feels that the one who is able to do great things for His people has done nothing for her." Pg 34 The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary: Ruth

But not only have I been dealt with harshly, she says, I am empty

- I left full but now I have nothing
- Clearly with no husband or sons she is feeling the pain of loss

This is what happens to us when difficulty comes into our lives

- We see only the misery and not the mercy of God
- We see all we lose and hardly recognize what we gain
- We attack God for bringing us low instead of see what He could be doing to lift us up and bring us through the dark hour.
  - He is all powerful, just not for me
  - He is merciful, he just does not show me mercy
- We blame God and get angry at Him
  - People in this state run from God
  - They accuse Him of being unloving or unkind
  - They assume that nothing good could come out of their suffering

It is natural for us to say: No matter what I try God makes it more difficult for me

- What is hard to do is to see how God could be at work in the midst of the difficult situation

Now while we can see Naomi's low point let us see the good things as well:

- She recognizes God is helping her
- Vs 20 God has brought me back
  - He may have taken everything away but He brought me back

Not only that, the Author of this book shows us how God is at work

Here the 3<sup>rd</sup> expression of God's Merciful Providence is at work:

God caused Naomi to return and He allowed it to be so

- Vs 21 the Lord Brought Me back
- She Returned

<sup>22</sup>"So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest." (Ruth 1:1-22 NAU)

## Ruth

“Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food.” (Ruth 1:6 NAU)

“So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.<sup>8</sup> And 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.” (Ruth 1:7-8 NAU)

“And they said to her, “No, but we will surely return with you to your people.”<sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?<sup>12</sup>” “Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons,” (Ruth 1:10-12 NAU)

“Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” (Ruth 1:15 NAU)

## Vs 22

<sup>22</sup>“So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabites, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.”

Who Repented? Who Returned? The Lord caused me to repent and I repented

- It is not wrong to say “I returned” Nor is it wrong to say “God brought me back.” Both are true so deal with it folks
- God is at work in me to will and to do for His good pleasure
- “I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?” (Ruth 1:21 NAS)

When Naomi hit bottom, God brought her back. God received her back He did not push her away

- This is normal life – we go and come back
- Go to school and come back
- We go to work and we come back
- We move away and we come back

IN this case Naomi followed her husband and left but God brought her back

- So to with you. You may leave but God will take you back
- God may bring you low when you leave so that you will come back and trust in him
- Return to Him
- He may even now be pouring out his Grace and mercy to you to cause you to return back to Him

The third expression of God’s mercy is that He will take Naomi back

- He too will take us back if we will but turn to Him

But there is a fourth expression of God's mercy:

She came back right at the beginning of the harvest

- She came back just at the perfect time
- This is often how God cares for us
- Even if she did not see it at the moment the Author lets us in on the details

Here Naomi is poor and in need of help and right when she returns is when she is able to receive help

- Often how God works to provide for us
1. IF you have run return to the Lord for He will take you back. If misery had lead you away let mercy direct you back. It is there friends. In so many ways the mercy of God is abounding around you
  2. If you are under the dark side of God's providence and misery is more of a companion than mercy remember that God is good and His mercy is never too far away
  3. If misery leads you to despair look for the evidences of God's mercy because they are always right around you when you are seeking His ways
    - a. Often His mercy is clouded in personal responsibility
    - b. Packaged in ways we do not expect – Naomi it came in the form of two daughters in law
    - c. Always found in the truth

After the storm this week we all have stories of His mercy. Don't fail to tell those stories. Ask the Borgstoms about their palm tree

- When this storm hit, all I saw was a large hurricane going up the center of the state. I thought for certain two church buildings and my house would be destroyed. Instead I see His mercy

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