



Ruth 1

*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.

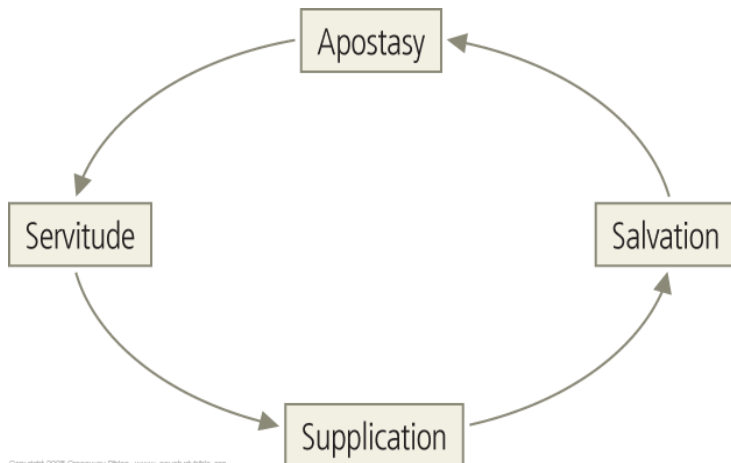
Josh McPherson is a pastor at Grace Covenant Church in Wenatchee, WA. Nine days ago his wife gave birth to their fourth child and the second of four who were born with spina bifida. As you can imagine, Josh and his wife have shed many tears over these two children but they have also processed it all from a strong Biblical point of view. This past January he wrote this.

I used to say, years ago, when people would ask how I reconciled evil and suffering with the reality of a loving God, I'd say something like, "God did not cause it, but He can use it for good." However, that answer quickly let me down. After 6 pregnancies in 6 years, 2 ending in difficult miscarriages, a third coming dangerously close, and 2 resulting in severe birth defects, I do not say that any more. Primarily because I don't believe it to be true.¹

At the end of this message I will explain what Josh meant in the last sentence. But as you can see, this morning we will be focusing on the sovereignty of God in the first chapter of Ruth. But before we get to the topic of sovereignty, the first thing one encounters in this story is great sorrow.

This is relevant for Mother's Day because we tend to turn the celebration into warm fuzzy, hip, hip hooray kind of a day. "Moms are the best! Motherhood is wonderful!" These are true, of course, but motherhood is also filled with sorrow. Sorrow at the death of a child. Sorrow over children who have strayed from the Lord. Sorrow over physical illnesses and disabilities like the pastor I quoted from. Motherhood will always have its share of sorrow and it is important to not only accept this but more importantly, know how to work our way through the sorrow.

Naomi was a mother accustomed to sorrow. In the first five verses I count no fewer than seven sources of sorrow in her life. First, the chapter begins *In the days when the judges ruled*. This phrase places the story of Ruth into a historical context—the days of the judges. There were a total of fourteen judges who ruled over a period of about 400 years in between Joshua who established Israel in the Promised Land to the end of the judges when Saul was anointed as king.



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their apostasy and God would save them from the hand of their enemy. Since there were fourteen judges it means that this cycle occurred at least fourteen different times. Sometimes the period of restoration and fellowship with the Lord was longer than others but the majority of these four hundred years was spent in servitude and slavery. This was the sorrowful condition in which Naomi lived.

Because of this cyclical apostasy, this period was also a time of anarchy. The very last verse in the book of judges reads as follows: *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes* (Judges 21:25). As the last verse in the book of Judges it comes right before the opening of the book of Ruth. There is no mistake that we are supposed to understand that Ruth and Naomi lived through this period of absolute anarchy.



The third reason for sorrow is listed later in the first verse. *In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land.* Can it get any worse for Naomi? Religious apostasy, civil anarchy and now a life-threatening famine. Their only recourse was to travel to a land that was not experiencing famine, in this case, to Moab about 50 miles to the southwest of their home town of Bethlehem.

We'll get back to the significance of the famine later but let's look at four more causes of sorrow in Naomi's life.

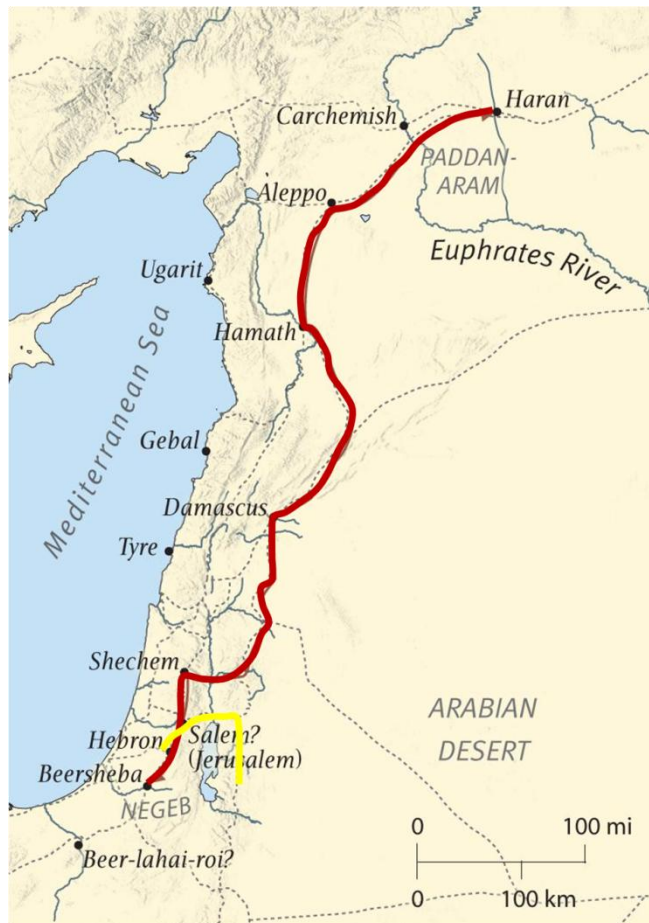
The next tragedy occurs in verse three. *But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died...* Apostasy, anarchy, a famine and now the death of her husband. From one to ten with ten being the worst, where would you place Naomi on the Tragedy Scale? She is moving quickly toward a ten, wouldn't you agree? Not only did her husband die, but now Naomi was stranded in this foreign land with no family to lend her support. At least she had her two sons to care for her, right? That's true, but her sons become the next cause of her sorrow.

The period of the judges was a time of great apostasy. This diagram shows the cycle of idolatry and apostasy. First the people would stray from the Lord and begin to worship foreign gods. As a direct discipline for their idolatry, the Lord would give them over to slavery and servitude of the foreign nations whose gods they served. It's as if God said to them, "If you want to serve these other gods then I will let you feel what true servitude feels like." Eventually the people would relent and repent from

The next source of sorrow was the fact that her two sons married foreign women. So what's wrong with that you ask? The Law of Moses strictly forbade the Israelites from marrying foreign women or being given in marriage to foreign men. *You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly* (Deut. 7:3-4).

But in light of the fact that Naomi and her sons were 'stuck' as it were in Moab, might it be a little unfair to hold to this standard under these difficult circumstances? This is the way we can sometimes think about God's commands. When we feel burdened by the circumstances of life we start to chip away at God's authority and think things like, "I know this is wrong, but God will forgive me. I know this isn't the best choice, but God understands my heart. God is gracious and merciful and he won't condemn me for this." Could this be what was going through the heart and mind of Naomi's two sons? The flat out compromised the direct command of God.

The best example of someone who sought to obey this command despite his circumstances was Abraham. The Lord called Abraham and Sarah into the Promised Land, which was the land of Canaan. When their son Isaac was four years old, where did Abraham seek a wife for Isaac? Do you remember—Abraham was old and he made his most trusted servant swear to find a wife for Isaac from his own people in the city of Nahor. Abraham refused to have Isaac marry a Canaanite even though he lived among the Canaanites.



Naomi's two sons could have done the same thing. They could have traveled the short distance to Judah and found wives for themselves. Look at this map and see the vast difference between the two journeys. Abraham's servants had to travel hundreds and hundreds of miles to find a wife for Isaac but Naomi's sons only had to travel about 50 miles. If the decision to marry foreign women did not break Naomi's heart, it most certainly should have.

The sixth sorrow she faced was the absence of grandchildren. For ten years neither daughter-in-law bore any children. As you may know, this culture viewed the inability to bear children as shameful and this sentiment would have carried over to the potential grandparents as well.

Finally, Naomi's seventh and final sorrow came when both of her sons died. This was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, the

nail in the coffin, the final insult to Naomi's sorrowful life. This is enough sorrow for several lifetimes so let's see how Naomi responded to these seven sorrows.

When her two daughters-in law decided to follow her back to Bethlehem, she dissuaded them saying, *"No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me."* The upon arriving in Bethlehem after her ten year absence she greeted her old neighbors saying, *"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?"*

I can't preach on this chapter without mentioning my niece who is named Mara. A few weeks ago I saw a facebook post of hers where she had found the meaning of her name which was something like beautiful. I can see why she would want a different meaning of her name than "bitter" so I looked up the origin of her name and here is what I found.

*"In Germanic but particularly Scandinavian folklore, a Mara is a kind of malignant female wraith believed to cause nightmares. In Belarusian mythology, "Mara" is the god of darkness and death. Mara is a Sanskrit word meaning the destroyer. She is a Hindu spirit of temptation, sometimes coined as the god of death; and also a "demon" of the Buddhist cosmology, the personification of Temptation."*²

The meaning of "bitter" sounds good in comparison! 😊

Naomi's words are more striking when you pull out five key phrases.

- *the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.*
- *the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me*
- *the LORD has brought me back empty*
- *the LORD has testified against me*
- *the Almighty has brought calamity upon me*

There is one thing for certain—Naomi believed in the absolute sovereignty of God over every aspect of her life. She believed that God was in control but she also believed that God had handed her a bad deal. To Naomi, God was sovereign but she was embittered against the Lord's providence.

The question we have to ask is did God really cause these things to happen or was that just Naomi's perspective. I think you will see by the end of this message that Naomi's perspective was correct. This is a view of God's sovereignty that most Christians either don't understand or don't like. Remember last week when I asked the question, "Is God really the ruler over everything?" Was God the ruler over Naomi's seven sorrows? Let's look at a few of the sorrows and see how God really was in control of every last detail.

Famines figure prominently throughout the Bible. Sometimes they are sent as a form of judgment, but not always. Perhaps the most famous famine occurred in Jacob's day. God brought that famine so that Joseph could rise to second in command of Egypt. God brought that famine

so that Joseph's family would have to travel from Canaan to Egypt to get food. God brought that famine so that all of Joseph's brothers and even Jacob himself would bow down to him and thus fulfill Joseph's dream. God brought that famine to work out his will and his good purpose, not only for Jacob's family, but for all of Israel and ultimately for us as well.

This famine is an integral part of the story because unless Naomi's family gets to Moab, and if they don't get to Moab they would never meet up with Ruth who was to become the great grandmother of Israel's greatest king! The famine was the catalyst for the entire story.

Likewise, the death of Naomi's husband was part of God's guiding providence because if he was alive, they may have stayed in Moab and not moved back to Bethlehem. The same goes for the death of Naomi's two sons. They were her only means of support and when they died, she was forced to return to her home town. Some people believe that their death may have been a judgment for disobeying the command not to marry foreign women.

What this means is that God is sovereign over famines, earthquakes, tornadoes and tsunamis. If a tornado picks up your neighbor's garage and sets it on the top of your house, like what happened to the Farrell family, God is sovereign over that. If two "hundred year" rains falls within ten months and your basement floods, like what happened to many of you, God is sovereign over that.

God is sovereign over the death of your loved ones. No one lives or dies without being a part of God's purpose and plan.

God is sovereign over the conception of your children. If you have eight or ten children, God was sovereign over that. If you are unable to conceive, God is sovereign over that. Karen and I wanted to have more children but it was not God's will for that to happen.

God is sovereign over every one of your sorrows but in a greater way that we normally think. Naomi was right—God handed each one of those sorrows to her. The Lord brought calamity upon her. He was directly and intentionally involved in each part of this story. But here is where we like to make a distinction and say that God didn't really cause Naomi's sorrows, he merely allowed them. But when it comes to God, this is a false distinction.

If a child was drowning in a pool and I was the only other person around and instead of diving in and saving them, I just sat in my lounge chair and read my book, would you hold me responsible for this child's death? In a literal sense, I didn't cause the death, did I? I didn't push the child into the pool. I didn't tie a 50 pound weight on their ankles so they would sink to the bottom but every court in the land and every court of human ethics and reason would hold me fully responsible for the death of that child. I didn't directly cause it but by "allowing" it, I became the cause.

The same is true of God. If he allows a sorrow or calamity in my life and he had the power to change that particular circumstance, then he becomes the cause. There is no middle ground in the sovereignty of God, Either he possesses complete control or he is not in control at all. This is the path that many Christians take. They hold the position called open theism which holds that God

doesn't even know the future, let alone is not able to control the future. Trust me—you don't want to go there.

This is why we just always return to the words of Job when he said, "*The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD*" (Job 1:21). Tell me—who "caused" Job's trials? Was Satan not the primary cause? Satan did the dirty deeds, so to speak, but God allowed it to happen and Job's conclusion to the whole mess was that *the Lord* had taken away his worldly possessions, his wonderful family and his health. In the second chapter, Job made the same argument, but even stronger.

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." 10 But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips (Job 2.9-10).

Do you see what Job was saying? He said that God gave him evil and we know that what he said was true because the text says that "Job did not sin with his lips." He was speaking the truth.

Now let me stop right here and make something perfectly clear, because I know what some of you are thinking. God cannot sin nor can he tempt anyone to sin. God is good and all that he does is good and perfect. Nevertheless, he does cause the sorrow in our life. It is part and parcel of what it means for him to be sovereign. If you wish for anything less than full sovereignty you wind up with an impotent God—a god who cannot help you when you cry out for help.

I started this message with the story of the pastor from Washington. He did not blame God for his child being born with spina bifida, but by his own admission, he did not really believe that God was in control at all. Listen to way he now processes his own sorrow.

So I stopped saying "God didn't cause it, but can use it for good" not only because I now believe this slogan went beyond and against the Bible, but because I believe it undercut the very hope I wanted it to create! If I denied that God could have intervened to prevent my daughter's birth defect, what hope would I have that he could now "use" it for good, when I was simultaneously denying that he couldn't prevent it from happening? I realized my reasoning was absurd. I was trying to relieve God of his sovereignty, and simultaneously stripping him of the power I so desperately needed him to have in my hour of need.³

If God doesn't have the power to prevent something from happening to us, how would he suddenly have the power to swoop down and turn all of our tragedy into something good?

Naomi had numerous deep sorrows and to her credit, she recognized the sovereign power of God over her life, but she did not take *comfort* in his sovereignty. Unlike Joseph, she was not able to see God's divine purpose playing out in her sorrow. Unlike Job, she did not praise the Lord in the depths of her sorrow.

What about you—is God sovereign over your sorrows?

Rich Maurer

May 13, 2012

¹ <http://www.gracecovonline.com/resources/sermons/sermon/the-smiling-face-of-gods-providence:-baby-mac--4>

² http://babynamesworld.parentsconnect.com/meaning_of_Mara.html

³ <http://www.gracecovonline.com/resources/sermons/sermon/the-smiling-face-of-gods-providence:-baby-mac--4>