

Providence – It’s not just a city in Rhode Island. Providence is a one-word description of God’s behind-the-scenes power governing every detail of life so that His ultimate plan and purpose succeeds. You and I need this word. More importantly, we need the assurance and comfort this word conveys because there comes an event (or multiple events) in every life that seems to make no sense, a time when God seems distant and the future looks grim. In that moment you will need to know God’s providence.

The Latin word “providentia” is made up of the prefix “pro” – “before” and “videre” – “to see.” God’s vision is perfect. Man can boast of 20/20 hindsight but God has 20/20 foresight. He alone knows the future and “He causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.” If not even a fallen sparrow escapes God’s notice (Mt. 10:29) then surely He knows our needs in advance and governs our lives accordingly. God will not insulate us from the pain of a fallen world but neither will He “leave us nor forsake us.” He cares for His needy children and is predisposed to act in the best interests of His people. That’s Naomi’s story in the book of Ruth. That’s our story too. (Interview with Thad Harris...)

God is committed to our growth. Growth means change. Change means loss. Loss means pain. I want to highlight three truths in the first chapter of Ruth that will help enlarge our appreciation of God’s providence in the midst of life’s pain.

1. LIFE IS HARD. Life is hard because life is loss. Naomi’s story is told in five short verses – over ten years of disappointment and setbacks and loss – without so much as a tear. The author piles on the pain. There are at least six painful circumstances in these verses. ...1:1-5.

a. “In the days when the Judges governed” refers to the dark 400 year period after Israel entered the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua’s leadership (roughly 1500 to 1100 B.C.). The last verse of the book of Judges sums it up, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” **Judges 21:25**. It was a time of great rebellion and chaos resulting from the disobedience of God’s people. They would sin against God, He would send an enemy to chastise them, they would cry out, God would mercifully raise up a Judge to govern them, they would rebel and the cycle would start over again. When a nation fails to humble itself under the chastening hand of God, things go from bad to worse so...

b. “There was a famine in the land.” Naomi knew there were painful consequences for rebelling against the Creator. **Leviticus 26:3-4** says, “If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit. **Leviticus 26:14-16, 19-20** goes on to warn, “But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, *and* so break My covenant, I, in turn, will do this to you...I will make

your sky like iron and your earth like bronze. Your strength will be spent uselessly for your land will not yield its produce and the trees of the land will not yield their fruit.”

c. “A certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. Moab was named for Lot’s son who was conceived through incest. It was considered a place of dishonor, a pagan land with foreign gods. God warned His people to avoid the Moabites and their practice of the worship of their national deity Chemosh. Chemosh was a blood-thirsty god who required child sacrifice. This is not exactly one of “the ten best places to live in the Middle-East” but Elimelech had no choice. At least there was food in Moab.

d. Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died making Naomi a widow dependent upon her two sons.

e. Naomi’s sons “took for themselves Moabite women *as wives*.” Scholars have an ongoing debate as to whether this was forbidden by God. At the very least a marriage between a Jew and a Moabite was problematic because Deuteronomy 23:3 says, “No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their *descendants*, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD.” The children of these Moabite women would not be able to participate in the worship of the one true God. If all this is not enough...

f. Naomi’s sons die. In the first five verses the author clears the stage of all male characters. It is as if the author wants to remove anything that would obstruct our view of God’s high regard for the lowly and the vulnerable. Naomi lived in a patriarchal culture that relegated women to second class status. She was not only a woman but a foreign woman, a widow woman, a childless woman with two foreign women for daughters-in-law. Naomi’s desperate situation is the perfect setting for God to showcase His passion for His purpose accomplished in unseen and unexpected ways. Make no mistake – there is a hero in this story and it is not Naomi, Ruth or Boaz. The hero of this story (as well as the Big Story) is God.

2. FAITH IS A RADICAL DECISION (not an educated guess). 1:6-19a. When life deals us a severe blow we often want to go back to where we started. Loss turns our face toward home and that’s exactly where Naomi goes as soon as the famine ends.... She encourages her widowed daughters-in-law to return to their families in Moab...vv. 8-13. After all, she says, God’s hand is clearly against me. Ruth and Orpah come to a moment of decision on the road to Bethlehem. The choice is clear: nothing in Bethlehem but God - or everything in Moab except God. Orpah weighs the facts and simply takes her mother in law’s advice and goes home. Orpah is not wicked, she is sensible. Moab offers hope. Bethlehem offers permanent widowhood.

But for Ruth this decision is not about geography or family or famine it is about God. What is breathtaking to me is not so much her tender words in vv. 16-17 but the conflict she faced between the weight of evidence Naomi mounted against God and the choice Ruth made to pursue that same God. Naomi says, “God is against me.” Ruth says, “Your God shall be my God.” What faith. She picks up the broken pieces of her life, pushes them to the center of the

table and declares, “I’m all in.” Ruth’s decision alters the course of history and advances the redemptive plan of God.

3. GOD IS GOOD...all the time. 1:19b-21. Naomi demands a new name. In a state of disequilibrium Naomi cannot yet see anything good coming out of her circumstances. Even when she is greeted by her own people she makes it clear that she should not be called “sweet” (Naomi) but “bitter” (Mara). She says, “For the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.”

There is no way around it; Naomi is a loser. She loses her home, her relationships, her husband, her sons and her perspective on God and His goodness. The Gospel begins with the assumption that we are all losers. The Gospel cannot be understood apart from loss. And you will never appreciate the Gospel until you acknowledge the pain of your own personal loss – loss of innocence, self-worth, pride, dignity, hope, faith. The Gospel is Good News for losers.

Twenty years ago, April 16, 1991, my father-in-law died in our front yard in a traumatic way. He was allergic to shell fish and inadvertently ate some at a nearby restaurant around the corner from where we lived. My mother-in-law drove him to our house and Jana attempted CPR while the ambulance came. Our three little kids stood at the window and watched the whole ordeal. Fast forward six months. Jana and I are at a conference in Orlando, Florida. We are driving through traffic on our way to the host church when I hear a siren. I pulled over and waited as the ambulance rolled past. When I pulled back onto the road I could hear Jana whimpering. I looked over and saw tears coming down her cheeks. “What’s wrong?” I had made no connection between that siren and the events of six months earlier – but Jana did. She said, “I just don’t know if I can trust God. I have trusted Him for so long but now I’m afraid that if I trust Him He might take away one of my children or you.”

Life is hard because life is loss. But God in His providence will take all the bitter experiences in our lives and turn them into something sweet. Can you trust Him? Will you trust Him? Jana said later that she came to a point where she realized that as vulnerable as she felt living with God she couldn’t live without Him.

(Prayer time...)

Chapter one ends with a glimmer of hope. It’s harvest time...1:22. There is a faint light shining through a window in that little town of Bethlehem. God is at work occupying the obscure and mundane matters of life. The extraordinary God is working through ordinary means; a lonely widow woman in her declining years with no children or grandchildren to care for her. But Naomi’s life is “in the hands of providence.” She is not in the throes of circumstance or at the whim of happenstance. She is in the hands of God’s providence. And so are you and so am I.