A SWEET AND BITTER PROVIDENCE

SEX, RACE, AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

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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, “[T]he 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 Timothy 3:16). “Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 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” (Romans 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

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often do we get the richest and deepest truth in the form of a passionate love story. The way Ruth and Boaz find each 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, 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 har-
mony. Racism and all manner of ethnocentrisms 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:

Minorities, now [August 2008] roughly one-third of the U.S. population, are expected to become the majority in 2042, with the nation projected to be 54 percent minority in 2050. By 2023, minorities will comprise more than half of all children. . . . The non-Hispanic, single-race white population is projected to be only slightly larger in 2050 (203.3 million) than in 2008 (199.8 million). In fact, this group is projected to lose population in the 2030s and 2040s and comprise 46 percent of the total population in 2050, down from 66 percent in 2008.²


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, “[T]he Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. . . . [T]he 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.

**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” (Micah 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.
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
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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.”

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

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?” She said to them, “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?”

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.

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 400-year period after Israel entered the Promised Land under the lead-
ership 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 (Joshua 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 (Judges 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 Books, 2008).
Jesus identified himself as “the son of David” (Matthew 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 (Isaiah 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

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 that 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

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-

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.”

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

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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” (1:21).
A Sweet and Bitter Providence. 106 printed pages. Sex. And since God is still sovereign, and we are male or female, and Jesus is alive and powerful, A Sweet and Bitter Providence bears a message for readers from all walks of life. But be warned, Piper tells his audience: This ancient love affair between Boaz and Ruth could be dangerous, inspiring all of us to great risks in the cause of love. To read this book, upload an EPUB or FB2 file to Bookmate. How do I upload a book? Search on Google. Impression.