

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

Ruth 11/26/95

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Techama Tec, Jewish-American historian and author wrote in her book When Light Pierced the Darkness that of Poland's 3.5 million Jews less than 10% survived World War II and the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Over 3 million were slaughtered.

It is said that many Jews became athiests as a result of the Holocaust. They couldn't reconcile the concept of the providence of God with the savagry they had witnessed.

The Providence of God is the continuing work of God whereby he preserves what he has created and guides all history to fulfill his intended purposes.

Last week I received a fax from H.B. London with Focus on the Family. In it he laments the loss of a good friend and colleague in the ministry at Focus on the Family.

Rob Gregory was 43 years of age, married and a father.

London described how the people of Rob's church were praying, how the Focus on the Family employees were praying for four days, how they joined hands across the auditorium two weeks ago Friday and prayed for Rob's recovery. **BUT ROB DIED!**

How can God be called "good" when he causes or even permits the death of a 43 year old husband and father who is working for the Kingdom of God?

Some of you have struggled with such questions!

A woman drowns her two sons, a woman and her boyfriend are brutally stabbed outside her Los Angeles home, a government building is bombed and scores including infant children die, a civil war unleashes hatred in Srebrenicia last July in which thousands are slain for no reason other than that they are of a different ethnic or religious background.

Wars, the Holocaust, Pol Pot's "killing fields" of Cambodia/ Kampochea, daily atrocities committed here and abroad, and the terrible destruction of

natural disasters such as Hurricanes, earthquakes, and typhoons, all combine to make many thinking people conclude there is no meaning, no order, only randomness to life - certainly no Providence of God, no Divine guiding hand - in fact how can there be any God at all?!

Not only have catastrophes left people doubting a God of Providence but so has some of modern science:

One theologian wrote, "Natural science has been the bridge on which many have crossed over to unbelief...Now that nature has given up her secrets and man has seen through what used to be called supernatural, the world has been relieved of God." (Berkouwer p20)

Faced with inexplicable misery it has become ever more popular for people to proclaim that religion is nothing but a projection of human wishful thinking.

Karl Marx described (religion) as a facade created by man to make an unbearable life bearable. Oppressed by miserable reality, man created in religion all sorts of illusions whereby he could escape his misery." (B p21)

Freud explained religion as man groping for refuge in the midst of a cruel world. Man's gods were given the task of absorbing the shocks of nature and of redeeming man from his unhappy fate. (B. 22)

As I already said, even God's people have through the centuries struggled with these issues and entertained similar doubts.

And the Bible doesn't gloss over such questions!

The Bible's authors freely admit their confusion, their wonderment at God's ways - ways that even include tragedy and pain.

The Psalmist wrote: "I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles, their bodies are healthy and strong...Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence - All day long I am plagued; I have been punished every morning." (73)

Job cried out at one point that he wished he had been born dead.

No, the Bible does not ask us to pretend the hard facts of life don't exist. No, the church must witness to who God truly is, hard edges and all.

Either God is in control and we have the problem of reconciling that with destruction and suffering in the world or we have a God who is not in control in which case we have no God at all.

Well, Is He or is He not in control? Is God's providence truly guiding everything to his desired ends?

Is God guiding every detail of today's history, of our lives?

WHAT DOES THE BOOK OF RUTH TEACH US?

We read the story last week and already this morning you have read again of the plight of this woman named Naomi.

The story of a woman whose husband and sons die leaving her destitute in a foreign country.

With one daughter-in-law in tow she returns to Israel where her fortunes change.

Her daughter-in-law goes to work in the fields of a man who it turns out is a distant relative and one who can rescue Naomi from her subsistence living.

With Naomi's planning and her daughter-in-law's attractiveness of character, the man, Boaz, is won over.

And by his planning, Boaz is able to marry the widow Ruth and raise up a son who will care for Naomi in her old age.

And it turns out that the son is to be the great-grandfather of King David.

Though the tale ends in good story-book fashion, Naomi's initial problem is illustrative of the tragedies of many.

And it again raises the age-old question, "how can I believe in the providence of God in the middle of a world of such suffering?"

In the first five verses of the story we see Naomi's life devolve from a picture-perfect existence into destitution.

The author gives us the tragic picture quickly with four elements:

First he tells us that Naomi lived in the time of the Judges.

If you would read the book that precedes this one you would get a picture of a country probably much like today's Bosnia, or Lebanon or Somalia.

The country is in chaos, leadership is inept if not corrupt

And in Israel most of the people have rebelled against God.

Secondly the author tells us there was a famine in the land.

I can't imagine Naomi and her family left Israel until things were very bad - until they saw no hope for surviving if they stayed - they were already in trouble when they moved.

Thirdly and fourthly the author tells us of the death of Naomi's husband and then her sons.

We'd have to be very insensitive not to have some sympathy and compassion for this woman.

Alone, destitute and in a foreign country with no welfare system - Naomi was in serious trouble.

Why wouldn't she wonder, "Where is God?"

Why wouldn't she be tempted to even assume there is no God?

Is God in control or isn't He?

And if He is in control how does Naomi possibly explain her situation?

Who's the main character in this story?

When you read the story more than once it becomes quite apparent that God is the main character.

I said to you last week that I believe one of the purposes the author intended for this book was to declare and demonstrate the providence of God.

Only twice does the author specifically mention God's direct intervention but God's fingerprints are all over this story.

I want you to follow, with me, the thread of the providence of God through this story:

1. Naomi's predicament is stated quite succinctly in the first five verses of chapter 1 and it isn't until verse 6 that we get our first hint at Naomi's response to God in the midst of it.

When Naomi heard that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she prepared to return home.

Not only the people who reported it to her but Naomi herself believes that "God had come to the aid of his people".

She credits God with an end to the famine.

She credits God with grace - God who came to his people's aid.

Is this just evidence of Naomi's superstition?

Does she, like many of the nations around Israel, just give credit to the gods for what we now know is simply an end to the drought?

By giving credit to God is Naomi just demonstrating her ignorance at where rain comes from?

No! Even though Naomi didn't have a scientific explanation for how the rains worked (and incidentally, we don't have much better explanations today) she understood the difference between primary and secondary causes.

And so regardless of what means, secondary causes, God used to end the famine she understood that God was ultimately, the primary cause behind the relief.

The Apostle Paul wrote the same thing: "God has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy"- Acts 14:17.

Naomi believed and the Bible teaches that God did not simply create everything and set it loose to operate on its own BUT that God is constantly superintending, guiding, and continuing to hold it all together.

There is no self-sufficiency other than God.
Nature is not self-contained and just rolling along - God is sustaining it actively and always.

The Bible tells us of a God who has not begun and then abandoned his creation but a God who is here, who cares, who rules and provides.
Now the author is not suggesting that God performed a "miracle" to end the famine - but he is saying GOD ended it.

God may use MEANS, as we will see in a minute, but the authors' point is that God is actively behind it all - sustaining what he has created.

God's providence is demonstrated by his active preservation of his creation.
Now that truth is demonstrated time and time again throughout this story but we must move on to another aspect of the providence of God taught here.

2. Please look to verses 8 & 9.

Here Naomi continues to demonstrate her belief in God's providence by praying to God - asking for his kindness.

Here she prays asking God to bless her daughters-in-law.

The very act of praying demonstrates a belief in the providence of God.

When we pray what are we demonstrating?

That we believe in a God who is there.

That we believe praying makes a difference.

That somehow God is moved by what we pray.

AS we will see, Naomi had absolute confidence in the providence of God - that God was controlling everything and yet she prayed.

Why?

If we believe God is sovereign and nothing catches God by surprise and that in fact God not only knows everything that will happen but that God has planned everything that will happen - why do we pray?

One, because communication is a natural result of relationship.

When you are related to someone you talk to them.
Naomi was in a talking relationship with her God.

But secondly, Naomi prayed and we pray because we recognize that prayer is one of the means that God uses to accomplish his purposes.

Naomi and we realize that not only our actions but also our prayers are ordained by God to bring about the results he desires. Therefore we pray.

3. Look with me at verses 20-21 of chapter 1.

Here Naomi's response to her predicament is quite different than many of us would expect.

Naomi is quite clear - she holds God responsible for what has happened. READ 20-21

Naomi casts blame on God!

She doesn't assume for a minute that there is any other power in the universe greater than God - so in her mind ultimately God is responsible.

Naomi is so convinced of the sovereignty and providence of God that she even attributes the bad things that have happened to her to God.

Today Evangelicals have a hard time with this.

We are so busy today protecting God from himself that we do mental gymnastics trying to account for a sovereign, loving God and the existence of evil in the world.

We end up trying to justify God.

Isn't it striking that neither Naomi nor the author reporting the story had any trouble with that?

They affirm that God's providence is behind everything that happens in life - EVERYTHING.

Do I mean that God is somehow responsible for earthquakes and floods and tonados?

What does the author teach here? God is responsible for famines and the death of Naomi's husband and sons.

(Now I have intentionally not dealt with the issue of the origin of sin in this sermon because there just isn't time but I do want to affirm what Naomi and the author of RUTH affirm - God is sovereignly controlling every experience of life.)

Job witnessed to the same truth when he declared, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed is the name of the Lord"

4. Next I want you to look at 2:20 READ.

Here again Naomi praises God for His providence.

But this time her praise is for God's providence in governing all events to accomplish his purposes.

Earlier I said that God is not only actively sustaining his universe but that God is also governing everything so that it turns out exactly as he planned.

That's what Naomi sees.

To understand the impact of this we need to go back to verse 3, chap 2

Ruth asked to go to work in the fields and Naomi said o.k.

Then the author in deliberate exaggeration tells us what happened:

"AS it turned out", Ruth found herself in the field of Boaz.

The author says it was by chance that Ruth showed up in Boaz's field.

Our expected response to that is "SURE!"

In fact, by saying it that way the author intends for us to know, just as the whole story makes clear, there was no "chance" involved at all - this is God at work.

So when we get to the end of the day at verse 19 when Ruth tells Naomi that she has been working in Boaz's fields, Naomi exclaims with her confidence in God's providence: "GOD has not stopped showing his kindness..."

God even directed the feet of Ruth to a certain field, God steered Boaz to the field that day, God had made certain that Boaz had heard the story about Ruth and Naomi and on and on the providence of God was at work governing the events to bring about exactly what he wanted.

In fact, as I mentioned last week, when we look at the whole story we see God's providence in governing the events of people so that his purposes are met.

How does the book end? 4:16-22 makes a big point out of what outcome? David, the great king of Israel came through the line of Ruth and Boaz.

How did the book begin? Elimilech whose name means "God is King" is from what city? Bethlehem!

Elimilech ("God is king") dies but what man is born in Bethlehem? David the one who reigned as King.

What's the point? God is in control of every event and every person - God is governing in all history to the end he desires.

5. Look with me now at 3:1-3.

Here we find Naomi planning how to get Ruth and Boaz together.

And if we looked at the first part of chapter 4 we would find Boaz planning how to make certain the other relative doesn't get to marry Ruth so Boaz can.

Does this mean God controls some things and people control others? Or does it mean that by planning, Naomi and Boaz don't trust the providence of God?

No! What the author shows us is that God often works his providence through us.

The author shows us that God is clearly working but is using the means of human action to accomplish his purposes.

Even in our actions God is at work - guiding, steering, governing to accomplish his desires.

6. I want to show you one more illustration of the providence of God in this story - an illustration that will probably trouble some of you because it comes, in our limited thinking, dangerously close to making God the cause

of sin.

Yet so complete is the providence of God that he even works through sin to accomplish his purposes.

Toward the end of the story - 4:11-12 - the people of Bethlehem are standing around congratulating Boaz on his soon to be marriage to Ruth.

In doing so they pronounce several blessings on him - one of them is at the end of verse 12 "may your family be like that of Perez" AND THEN THEY ADD "whom Tamar bore to Judah".

Now I have to believe that none of the words the author uses are superfluous - that is, that he knew exactly what he was doing when he described who he was talking about by not only referring to the man's name but MOST SPECIFICALLY when he refers to the man's father and mother.

Now some of you may remember that Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah (one of the twelve sons of Jacob) and when Judah sinned against Tamar by not giving her one of his sons she pretended she was a prostitute and Judah had sex with her and the result was Perez.

The providence of God is so certain that not even sin can stop the plans of God.

In fact God will even use sin to accomplish his purposes.

Somehow this author could put God right in the middle of a sinful situation and demonstrate the providence of God without staining God's character at all.

The providence of God is so pervasive that there is no place and no circumstance in which God is not guiding to achieve his purposes.

But let's conclude by going back to Naomi when she was still in Moab - her husband and sons had died, she was left destitute.

Why did she not just curse God and die?

Why didn't she jettison her faith in a God who cares for her?

Why did she go on believing in the providence of God even in the midst of her tragic circumstances?

First of all because Naomi was not a Deist or an Agnostic.

She knew God had not left his universe to fend for itself.
She knew God was at work in everything.

Secondly, Naomi didn't give up on God because she knew God was not a sentimentalist.

Some in the past, and even today, want to make God into our personal errand boy.

We want a God who is only love never justice or wrath.

Some today find it incomprehensible that God would do anything contrary to what they think is in their best interest.

But Naomi knew that the God of the Bible is not a "gentle philanthropist" but the God of judgment as well as grace, the God of wrath as well as mercy.

She never expected that God was there just to make life comfortable for her.

We often assume that God's providence has as its goal our comfort and pleasure.

But the providence of God has most of all to do with accomplishing God's goals - goals which not so incidentally include our welfare - but notice it is our good not just our comfort that God aims to achieve.

Why did Naomi not despair in her tragedy?

Because, by God's grace, Naomi could live without understanding everything about how God works - she trusted him.

G.C. Berkouwer wrote, "The struggle with doubt is the struggle against the protest of the autonomous man, who sees the limits with God (has placed on) human knowledge as an outrage against man's freedom and happiness.

Through the sovereignty of God's grace this protest is withdrawn. And in the withdrawal of protest, worship is born." (B. 275) Naomi worshipped her God and trusted him.

Some might too quickly ask, "Well isn't that just fatalism"

No! Fatalism is blind, irrational chance.

Naomi had faith - and faith is not belief in blind chance but trust in the sovereign, living God who loves her.

Betsy TenBoom of Holland was nearly dead in a German concentration camp and yet she spoke of her faith in the providence of God

One of the others in her "hell" hole held up her disfigured and broken hands and fingers and snarled "My name Maria Fratckek, I was first violinist in the Warsaw symphony - did you God of love will this?"

Betsy TenBoom gave the final apologetic, one with which Naomi would have gladly concurred - "I don't know, I only wish you knew my God."

What Betsy was saying was that the only way to live without despair in a world of pain or to live without the idolatry of self in a world of comfort is to know the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ - the one who loved us and gave Himself for us.

That God, Betsy, Naomi and I, by his grace, will follow to the end of the earth

I believe in the providence of God!