

The Clouds You So Much Dread Are Big With Mercy (Ruth 4:11-22)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on February 21, 2010

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Ruth 4:11-22 (NASB95) ¹¹All the people who were in the court, and the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; and may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem. ¹²“Moreover, may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the LORD will give you by this young woman.” ¹³So 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. ¹⁴Then 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. ¹⁵“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.” ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. ¹⁷The 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. ¹⁸Now these are the generations of Perez: to Perez was born Hezron, ¹⁹and to Hezron was born Ram, and to Ram, Amminadab, ²⁰and to Amminadab was born Nahshon, and to Nahshon, Salmon, ²¹and to Salmon was born Boaz, and to Boaz, Obed, ²²and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David.

At first reading, that genealogy in v. 18-22 may not seem like a life-changing or powerful or profitable passage, does it? At first glance, it would seem the story could have ended in v. 17. Most of you maybe recognize only 1 or 2 names in the list, and when you come to these lists of names in Bible reading, you usually skip right over them. Reading who *beget* who may not make you be getting too excited. But we affirm here that 2 Timothy 3:16 is actually true: “**all Scripture** [not some of it] *is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness ...*” [including genealogies]

I not only want to say that, I want us to *see that* at the end of Ruth 4, and how its last chapter and even its last verses tie in with the first chapter and its first verses in ways God intends to profit us, even in the genealogy if not especially the genealogy.

Romans 15:4 *For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

Willam Cowper wrote these words in our hymnal (#342)

1. God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea And rides upon the storm.
2. You fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break In blessings on your head.
3. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence God hides [alternate: “faith sees”] a smiling face
4. His purposes will ripen fast, Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste, But sweet will be the flower.
5. Blind unbelief is sure to err And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter, And He will make it plain.

And I think Ruth chapter 4 does exactly that. God is His own interpreter and He will make plain some of what He was doing at the end of chap. 4, though much of what He was doing the original characters did not understand in their lifetime. That hymn has good theology from someone whose life didn't always seem or feel "good."

I've heard a pastor share how impactful it was in his church when he preached through the book of Ruth on 4 successive Sundays. Each service they sang that hymn I just read, and after he finished the series, a mother who had been suffering terribly in her life told him how much her life and thinking had been transformed by that series, as if God had written this book for her (which He had, along with others, too :) She embroidered the words of the hymn as a gift to express her appreciation at how much that song had come to mean to her in light of the message of Ruth, and I believe that pastor to this day hangs the tapestry in his home as a testimony, not a tribute to his great sermons, but their great Sovereign God. May God similarly write the truths of Ruth on the fabric of our hearts! The title of today's message comes straight out of hymn line #2:

The Clouds You So Much Dread Are Big with Mercy

The theology that undergirds that title and that hymn and my life begins with the doctrine of God's providence; the Scriptural truth that all things in life are given or guided or governed not by fate or forces outside God's control, but by the hand of a sovereign and good God. And that includes the dark clouds and dark times of life, and the things that we don't at the time understand or even want.

Providentially, the next verses we'll be studying in James (5:10-11) actually tie very much in with the story of Ruth and point us back in suffering to consider OT believers, and their stories, how their compassionate merciful God sustained them (Job, prophets). God's Providence has big mercy for us as we taste and see He's good by looking back to the OT. John Flavel wrote: "Some providences like Hebrew letters, must be read backwards." And in the book of Ruth, if we go backwards from the end back to the beginning of the story, we can read / see God's Providence.

Ruth 1:1 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. 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, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there.

In the first verses of the book, there are dark clouds for Naomi that will only get darker (v. 3, 5), but the clouds she so much dreads are big w/ mercy. The end of chap. 4 moves clouds and mercy abounds

1st Cloud: A Time of Spiritual Darkness (1:1)

When the first verse of the book tells us this story took place in the days of the judges, we should notice that the book right before Ruth is the book of Judges, one of the most discouraging books to read in the OT, in one of the darkest times of their history, and it ends on one of the most dismal notes of any book ... it leaves you looking for something better and wondering what God will do.

Judges 21:25 *In those days there was no **king in Israel**; everyone did what was right **in his own eyes**.*

So that's where the first verse of Ruth picks up with, a time when there is no king, which sets up the need for the last verse of Ruth. The very last word in the book of Ruth is what?...*David*. The book begins in a time where Israel had no king, and it ends with the birth of Israel's greatest king of OT times, King David. At the beginning of this story, all that can be seen is the dark cloud of the time of the judges, but that very cloud itself is actually big with mercy and it is on this barren landscape that God will rain blessings on their head.

The story of Ruth should encourage God's people of all times: God is always working, even in the darkest of times. Where we can't see His hand working, we can still trust His heart, because He is working in all things (even things that are not good in and of themselves) bringing about final good to all who love Him *even at the very moment that sinful men are doing whatever they want!*

- This very time of darkness was *not just used by God but intended by God* to be the backdrop for His merciful light
- The dark background of immorality through the book of Judges is where the glory of purity shines brightly in Ruth
- The very dark cloud of idolatry in the days of Judges, every man choosing whatever "god" his own eyes sees is right, this makes Ruth's following the true God stand out (1:16)
- The very cloud of disloyalty is a set-up for Ruth's devotion
- Her love is contrasted with lustful men in times of Judges
- Her kindness diverges from the cruelty we read in Judges
- Her obedience stands out against Israel's disobedience
- The faithfulness of a Gentile woman is all the more striking on the stage of the faithlessness of men of God's covenant people ... that very cloud of the judges was big with mercy
- Right in the middle of a desert of rebellion spiritually, God plants an oasis of righteousness; big mercy from a big God!

You fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

The introduction to the list of names in 4:18 uses a term that may even hint of this. It's translated as "family line" or "generations" or "genealogy." In the Greek translation of OT, it uses the word *genesis*. In the underlying Heb., *toledoth* is most frequent and famous in the book of Genesis.

Why might that be significant in a time of spiritual darkness? One writer explains: 'The use of the term *toledoth* in Genesis always designated a significant movement in God's program of redemption ... [and] signaled either the continuance of the "Seed" promise of Genesis 3:15 or the narrowing of that promise [Abraham through Isaac] ... This *toledoth* here at the end of the book of Ruth, then, would signal to the believing remnant that something significant in God's program of redemption was being revealed – and quite likely it involved the narrowing of the "Redeemer-Seed" promise that would lead to the world's blessing and redemption.

The final “genealogy” in Genesis was of Jacob and his twelve sons (Gen. 37:2) [which Ruth 4:11 alludes to, Rachel and Leah who birthed the 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel]. At the end of Jacob’s life, as recorded in Genesis 49:8-12, he prophesied that the Ruler would come from the tribe of Judah [which Ruth 4:12 alludes to, Judah thru son Perez] ... the “sons of Perez” became the leading/dominant clan within the tribe of Judah. The believing student of these Scriptures would then wonder if the Ruler/Redeemer-Seed would then be from that clan. This genealogy confirms ... and leads the reader from “Perez” to “David” – who would then be graced with the divine promise of a “Seed”/Son who would rule God’s house forever...’¹

In the midst of a time of spiritual darkness, big mercy was at work.

2nd Cloud: A Time of Physical and Financially Difficulty

Ruth 1:1 *Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that **there was a famine in the land** ...*

In an agrarian society, a famine meant tremendous physical and financial difficulty, and the real threat of your family dying out. It was not just a brief downturn in their economy of a few years. The text later explains it was more than a decade that went by before the land was again visited with God’s favor. This dark cloud of difficulty must have made it hard to see what God was up to. Israel was the one piece of real estate on earth God had promised to bless

Where is God in times like this? Why do we have to go through this for so long? Why does it seem He’s not keeping His promise? Why is God’s Providence frowning on His own people?

Actually, the famine *was* God’s keeping His promise, as He said He would do to get their attention when His people turned away. It was God’s kindness that brought this dark shadow over the land, so that His people would recognize His sovereignty and repent and return (a word used over 10x in Ruth 1 as a theme). God’s kindness should lead us to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

Behind the frowning providence and circumstance, God’s smiling face was hidden from their sight, but it was there. Elimelech in v. 1 doesn’t seem to be motivated by faith or repentance, but seemingly only thinking of finances and relocation in moving his family to Moab, a fertile land but a pagan idol-worshipping child-sacrificing land named after a man born from an incestuous relationship, and a place right next to another pagan stronghold Sodom & Gomorrah. The Moabites were bitter enemies of Israel throughout its history.

How does this tie into the genealogy at the end? It’s a Moabitess in physical and financial difficulty herself, a desperate widow, whom the Good Shepherd brings to His fold in Bethlehem and His family through marriage to Boaz, and it is through her children to come, especially her great-grandson David that God’s providence and predetermined plan will take Israel from poverty to prosperity! Interestingly, the story’s first line has “Elimelech” meaning “my God is King,” (though he may not live up to his name) and the story’s last word line: “David,” God’s King (who uplifted God’s name and lived up to it). It starts in a time of *great recession* in Israel, and concludes in a time of *great riches* for Israel, and even expansion of the land under their greatest OT ruler David.

Lowest point in Israel's history in the book's 1st verse, but by the last verse of the book, it's at the highest point in Israel's history! This dark cloud so much dreaded in the opening of this book was big with mercy all along, and by the end is pouring down blessing.

It was a great celebration on that wedding day in chapter 4 for Ruth and Boaz. Naomi who once felt she was under a dark cloud is now feeling like she's on cloud 9! Famine had turned to marriage feast, but the best was yet to come for her and redemptive history.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence God hides / Faith sees a smiling face

I think everyone's face is smiling by the end:

Ruth 4:11 *All the people who were in the court, and the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home **like Rachel and Leah**, both of whom **built the house of Israel**; and may you achieve wealth..."*

In other words, they're wishing wealth for him and his wife, the former widow who was so destitute she worked as the lowest of laborers, gathering leftover barley scraps like someone today who dives in dumpsters to collect empty cans to eke out an existence. They're not only wishing wealth on this wedding to this former widow, they're wishing a bunch of kids for the formerly barren (1:4 says Ruth had no kids after 10 years of marriage, which under the ungodly laws of some Jewish rabbis could be cause for divorcing a barren wife).

Ten years, no sons to keep the family name alive ... but at the end of the book, there are ten generations of sons listed in this line. Coincidence? Or is maybe the author implying God can make up for 10 years of barren land and barren womb by 10 generations of sons. Maybe the 10 years of barrenness might have reminded the Jews of their father Abraham, who was promised a son who would beget many generations, but ten years go by for him and ... no son.

But Genesis tells us after ten years, the Lord enabled her to conceive a son who is the great-grandpa of Perez in the line (4:18). In 4:13, it says this Lord enabled the once-barren Ruth to conceive after marrying Boaz in Bethlehem, using similar language to how God also enabled conception in the once-barren Rachel (v. 11), the most famous Jewish woman buried in the little town of Bethlehem.

This story was written in earlier times so that we might have hope, I hope you see how God is working even when we can't see it at the time. *God has big mercy for His people even in (1) times of spiritual darkness, and (2) times of physical or financial difficulty*

3rd Cloud: A Time of Ordinary and Regrettable Decisions

The first few verses of Ruth tell of a very ordinary family, ordinary people in the ordinary course of life, everyday lives, run of the mill routine regular commonplace people, even very mundane names. And if you look at the last few verses of the book, you see names not more meaningful or monumental it seems that Mahlon and Chilion that we read about at the beginning of Ruth chapter 1.

It may not excite you to read unimpressive names that close this book like Ruth 4:18ff: Perez, Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon ... but I don't know if you ever thought of it this way: the fact that most of the people in God's plan were ordinary people used by an extraordinary God should encourage us, and should even excite us! God's plan doesn't just include people like Ruth that have a Bible book named after, or David, a famous king.

God has always had an important part in his plan for people who may not seem that important to others. He knows them each by name, and cares for each person, and especially seems to delight to use the "average" and unimpressive and unimposing among us in His plan. A few times in all of Biblical history, God used a mighty man who He worked miracles through, but for the most part He uses the mundane men and woman who are mediocre at best. Our God is working not just in extraordinary events but in ordinary life.

We should be encouraged by how God's Providence worked in the middle of this story (if you're not familiar, read this afternoon). And we should also be encouraged by how this book begins and ends, highlighting God's everyday mercy to everyday people (us)!

And commonplace families like Elimelech's and ours not only live mostly ordinary lives, there are regrettable decisions they make in life or their grown kids make, that bring pain to a mom or dad. This story shows us later how much Naomi regretted their decision to move to Moab, as well as what happened in 1:4; both her boys marrying Moabite women, marrying outside the faith of Israel. We see in v. 15 that after many years of marriage to her Israelite sons, Orpah still had not abandoned the idols and gods of Moab, and the words to Ruth there hint at how much grief Naomi had of this.

But this story shows that even our unwise and ungodly past choices don't end God's plan for the future or His providence in the present. Remember, this story is written *so we might have hope*

Even though Naomi's family left the Promised Land and moved to Moab, sinfully spending many years in ungodly land, the words of the man mentioned in the last verse of Ruth (David) held true: *Surely goodness and **mercy will follow me all the days of my life...*** (Psalm 23:6)

The mercy of the Good Shepherd pursued His wandering sheep Naomi. We're not sure if David met his great-grandparents, but it's pretty like he would hear their story again and again growing up. In an earlier message we traced many connections in language between Ruth 1 and Ps 23, and as David had time to tend his sheep perhaps he saw some parallels poetically? But for today's study, I want us to see a few more providential connections between the climactic concluding name at the end of this story so beautifully bookending with its beginning, lining the very clouds with mercy.

Notice carefully in both 1:1 and v. 2 a phrase *Bethlehem in Judah*. Now flip forward to the genealogy in Ruth 4:18. It begins with the name Perez. Why Perez? Who is Perez? The wedding blessing given to Ruth and Boaz explains the Perez-Judah connection:

4:12 *"Moreover, may your house be like the house of **Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the LORD will give you by this young woman.**"*

In Genesis 38, Tamar's husband died, leaving her a Gentile widow like Ruth. The closest of kin Onan did not fulfill his duty in the Law to marry her and produce an heir (also similar to Ruth 4:5-6). In Tamar's extraordinary circumstances, when the other next of kin, Judah's son is not given to her either, Tamar in her desperation and fear of destitution in times that were physically and financially difficult for widows like her, she departs from the Lord's ways, disguises herself as harlot and deceives dad-in-law Judah, a sinful liaison. And the result was Tamar conceiving twin boys, one being Perez, who became the main ancestor of the people in Bethlehem.

But God's sovereign grace and plan isn't stopped by sinners or sin. The very stigma and stain on their regrettable heritage had been washed away by big mercy from God through that very same dark cloud of past decisions and sinful choices that are nothing to be proud of, but that are redeemed by the Lord so we'll boast of Him. And it seems the people of Bethlehem celebrate that grace in 4:12.

And wouldn't you know it? In Ruth 4:21 we read: *and to Salmon was born Boaz* [Mt 1:5 says through Rahab the harlot]. Another regrettable past that God redeemed for His glory. Even the best name in the list, David, made ungodly choices (Bathsheba). 3x in the last 5 verses of Ruth 4, we have a child born by a woman of pagan background, sometimes even a prostitute! This is not just a dry list of names, we should be reading **grace** in this genealogy! If we really believe what I read earlier in Rom. 15:4, this is part of what *was written in earlier times...so that...we might have hope.*

If God's providence extends to even unwise or ungodly choices we have made in the past, and it does, His grace is greater than our sin! The Lord's grace to widows and others in great difficulty is what is being wished upon Ruth in 4:12, not only that she would be able to have children, but that like Perez, many more generations of children to come after her in a family name that never dies out. Oh, they had no idea how big with mercy the clouds were that day!

4th Cloud: A Time of Unexpected Deliverance

There's another phrase in the opening lines of Ruth 1 that hints of this to later readers of the OT. The end of Ruth 1:2 mentions not only Judah, but that this family of Elimelech and Naomi and their sons were "*Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah.*" That's another phrase we may fly by and that doesn't interest us much more than genealogy lists. But this is not just filler, it's a phrase found in another place outside Ruth that is very noteworthy.

Look at the end of Ruth 4:11 again more closely at what the people of Israel wish upon Boaz at his wedding. 4:11b: "... ***may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem.***"

Turn to the book right after Ruth; 1 Samuel 17, and remember this is all a continuous story, and we come to a day where Israel's land is again under a dark cloud, this time from their military enemies the Philistines, under a shadow they so much dreaded of Goliath:

1 Sam 17:10 *Again the Philistine said, "I defy the ranks of Israel this day; give me a man that we may fight together."*¹¹ *When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were **dismayed and greatly afraid.***

¹² Now David was the son of the Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, whose name was Jesse ...

Every OT Jew would have known well the words of the story of David and Goliath, and how their deliverer was introduced, and in hearing the exact same phrase in the beginning of Ruth, they would instantly think of this and sense something notable to take place?

Interestingly, there's only one other place in the Bible that has the words (Bethlehem, Ephrathah), also very familiar to OT Jews, in a similar context under the dark dreaded clouds of their enemies:

Micah 5 (NIV) ¹ *Marshal your troops, O city of troops, for a siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel's ruler ...* ² *"But you, **Bethlehem Ephrathah**, though you are small among the clans of **Judah**, out of you **will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel**, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* [another deliverer greater than David!] ... ⁴ *He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.* ⁵ *And **he will be their peace** ...*

So the beginning of the Ruth has a man from Bethlehem Ephrathah who seeks to deliver his family from Judah unsuccessfully by going to Moab, and we see the need for a godly man as a deliverer who will be a man after God's own heart rather than simply doing what was right in his own eyes like almost everyone in these days.

The first verse of Ruth has the phrase "*man of Bethlehem*," and the last verse of the book closes with the most famous "man of Bethlehem" in the OT, King David. But as great as David was, Israel needed another deliverer and King, and so do we. And the son of David, the great Solomon, wasn't it. "One greater than Solomon" has come (Mt 12:42 NIV), this One said, namely Jesus.

The book of Ruth is a prelude to King David, but it and the rest of the OT is really a prelude to a coming "Son of David" (a title used 17x in the gospels about Jesus). The genealogy at the end of Ruth gives fathers and sons (at least a representative genealogy) but it ends with David and doesn't say who the son of David is. But the first verse of the NT picks up where Ruth ended.

The book of Ruth doesn't end with "and they all lived happily ever after" (someone else would have to come to make that possible in another life and another place called heaven). The book of Ruth doesn't conclude with "the end" but more like "to be continued..."

Matthew 1:1 (NASB95) *The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, **the son of David** ...* ³ ***Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar**, Perez was the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram.* ⁴ *Ram was the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon.* ⁵ *Salmon was the father of **Boaz by Rahab**, Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse.* ⁶ *Jesse was the father of **David the king**. David was **the father of Solomon by Bathsheba** who had been the wife of Uriah.* ⁷ *Solomon was the father of Rehoboam ...*

As the list goes on, not only do we see God's grace in allowing sin and sinners and even sinful unions producing offspring in the line of the Messiah, we see how desperately we need the Messiah to come to be our ultimate Deliverer from sin, as the best of men fail.

Finally a name stands out in 1:16, a name meaning 'Yahweh saves'

¹⁶ *Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom **Jesus** was born, who is called the Messiah ...*

2:1 *Now after Jesus was born in **Bethlehem of Judea** in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem[why?]⁵ They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:⁶ 'AND YOU, **BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH;***

FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ...

*...¹⁶ Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi.¹⁷ Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:¹⁸ "A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, **WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE.**"*

Jesus was delivered from sinful men, and it was Jesus Himself who would deliver sinful men. Satan knew the prophecy and incited Herod to wipe out all baby boys in Bethlehem (and Satan tried to wipe out the Messiah and his line before) but Jesus is King. And Jesus not only delivers sinners who mourn over their sins in true repentant faith, he also delivers mothers in unfathomable grief and loss, like Rachel in Bethlehem, like Naomi in Bethlehem, and all who will not be comforted by anything or anyone else, there is comfort found in Bethlehem, there is a balm in Gilead, there is a Great Physician from Galilee, there is a Carpenter who fixes souls.

And this is what Naomi needed when her husband died, and her children are no more, and she is weeping and depressed and bitter.

I originally wanted to get to that in this message, but there was so much mercy just in the 1st couple verses of the book as bookended with the last couple verses, and I haven't even exhausted what's there. So I want to come back to complete the completion of this book next week, which was written in earlier times to give us hope. In the darkest cloud Naomi faces (death) there's the biggest mercy.

-Behind each frowning providence there is God's smiling face.

-Behind each dark cloud, there is His grace and His very big mercy

-Whether ordinary times or extraordinary times, times of spiritual darkness, times of physical or financial difficulty, regrettable decisions we or others in our family make that are unwise/ungodly, praise God for our undeserved and unexpected deliverer Jesus!

¹ Rick Kress, *God in Everyday Life*, p. 151-52.