

Reading: Ruth 1:1-22

Subject: Are There Any Purposes for Our Dark Times?

As a Christian and as a pastor I've been asked a number of times "Why did this happen?" or "Why is this happening?" The often-unasked question being "Why did God let this happen?" "Why?" is probably the most asked question of all time and can be brought about by events internationally, nationally and personally that cause distress, pain, loss and fear to arrive in our lives. Sometimes just one word can trigger that question off in peoples' lives – stroke, tumour, cancer, melanoma, incest, adultery, death, paralysis, suicide, inoperable, terminal etc. The question "Why?" becomes an aggravated, a more intensely anguished question when bad things happen to good people, and especially when they happen to us personally.

As we read our reading, perhaps we could ask that question, perhaps we have further questions for God, even questions that Naomi may have asked, such as "Why has He done this? Where has He been?" Harold S. Kushner was Rabbi Laureate of Temple Israel in Natick, Massachusetts and his son died of a very, very rare disease and he wrote a bestselling book called 'When Bad Things Happen to Good People' and he asked if God exists and is minimally fair, how can He do this to me and my innocent child. In the book we see the confusion of a broken-hearted father. He lists 3 possibilities:

- a. God is just and only gives people what they deserve – God is presented as a just but merciless tyrant.
- b. God is cruel and therefore gives people what they don't deserve – God is presented as a powerful but sadistic monster.
- c. God is kind but not all powerful – God is presented as a kind but impotent grandfather.

Are any of those comforting to you? They are not to me! Reading the word of God, we see these 3 possibilities are totally inadequate explanations of the living God. Yes, He is inflexibly just, but He is

not only just; He may inflict pain, but He is never sadistically cruel; He is kind, but that is not governed by lack of power. In Psalm 135v6 we read *“The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.”* Just think of what God is like – the basics, things that are always true of God and see He is the God who is always totally in control, who is love and all wise in all things. This means that all that happens is according to His express will, plan and purpose -including our personal lives, the events of our nation and international events. What He plans in eternity, people will demand and bring about in time and yet do so from their own desires, working and planning! Acts 2v23 *“This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross...”* This God determined event in eternity past, was fulfilled by the real desires, actions and weaknesses of men and women.

We are to remember that God is the Sovereign Ruler of time and space and yet He works His plans and purposes out in history. Sometimes these are dark and strange events, dark providences. I and other Christians use the word Providence quite a bit, so what is it? The Providence of God speaks of His working out His purposes in time and guiding all to their predetermined ends. Many of our forefathers try to define this, but basically it means that nothing happens by chance or outside the sphere of God's control. God uses secondary causes so often to bring about His purposes and the fulfilment of His plans. If we are a Christian then we need to have a truly Christian view of God as presented in His word and we need to recognise that He works all out in this world according to His appointments and timetable. To us there are happy providences, glad providences which we delight in; at other times there are dark providences, where the darkness is cold and bitter to us in our life experience and are not pleasant as we go through them or view them.

We are going to be faced with these questions here in v1-5 as we see a series of tragic events that happened to real people and we'll centre our attention on Naomi in particular as she seems the central character in the book. The writer of this book is a master storyteller as the facts are stripped to the basics and there's no feelings or no emotions recorded. A good storyteller knows what to include and to leave out of the story they are telling. If this was the opening scene of a film, we can imagine the camera focused in on Naomi's tear-filled eyes, and then it would move out to show us her face which is probably worn with grief and resentment - even picking out bitterness in her eyes and face. As the camera goes back further there will be 2 younger women on her shoulders both with tearstained faces, and as it moves out again we see some country region and there, just appearing over their shoulders, will be the three mounds of the graves of their husbands. These are dark providences and the question "Why?" screams out. I want us to look very briefly at 5 providences - 3 which are broad and general and 2 which are more specific and personal.

1. In the Days When the Judges Ruled. (v1)

Here we see the setting of these events. It is a dark time for the people of Israel - between the death of Joshua and the anointing of the first king; it is a time when people turned from God, when everyone did what they wanted and we see a cycle repeated 7 times in the history of Israel in the book of Judges - sin, servitude, supplication and salvation. The setting of this book is in a time when it was difficult to follow the Lord, yet life went on and Naomi and Elimelech meet, fall in love, marry and have two sons. If we were among the original readers of this book we may have wondered about this family living in dodgy times in a hillbilly village - would they be more examples of moral failures, or could it be that God would intervene in their life in some way? The opening phrase may not mean much to us, but it roots this account in the history of Israel, at a most depraved and dark time some 3 millennium ago. Yet in

that time God was still at work, working out His plans and purposes. Realise that even in the darkest situations of our lives God is still in control and is working His plans and purposes out even in our lives. That doesn't mean we are going to understand it, or be insulated from any hurt, or like it!

2. There Was a Famine in the Land. (v1)

What a time to be living in; there was religious indifference; low moral standards; there was rejection of any authority and there was a famine = an economic catastrophe. The nation depended on its agriculture and the famine in the land meant economic and life-threatening hardships. It probably led to social tensions - no doubt the rich oppressing the poor, the poor would have tried to exploit one another and people were dying. We don't know if this was caused by drought or by the action of Israel's enemies operating a scorched earth policy and destroying anything and everything - including crops and animals. This famine seems to have been going on for years, as it compelled Elimelech and his family to move to Moab and in v4 we are told they stayed there for 10 years. Just pause a moment and realise that this was the Promised Land, the land of Israel, the land of God's chosen and covenant people, the land of milk and honey. Yet only some 40 to 50 miles away in Moab there was no famine! Realise this famine is part of an out working of God's judgement on the land - the people needed to realise that the fertility gods they went after were impotent and they needed to turn back to Him.

It is so easy for us to be taken up with other things - legitimate things, and forget the Giver of such blessings. The Lord deals with us and will gently bring us back to Himself, but He is prepared to remove all that interferes with our love for Him, to take from us all that will hinder our relationship and love for Him. He does it not because He is harsh and cruel, but because He loves us and knows this is best for us. Moving on we see:

3. The Family. (v2)

Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons experience this dark Providence of famine and they have to move out of the land. To leave one's home, land and people are difficult at the best of times, let alone when it's forced on you by famine and you become a refugee in another land. Here was a new land, a new language, a new culture and they were surrounded by a radically different religion. They left the land that God had promised to singularly bless and went to Moab. To Elimelech and Naomi this seemed the only desperate hope of survival and no doubt they questioned where God was in all this? We will look more at the family next week.

4. Naomi's Yo-yo Circumstances. (v 3-4)

Here in Moab Elimelech died and the incident is reported so matter-of-fact. Naomi must have asked "Why?" She had to get on with her life, yes carrying her load of grief as she had her two sons with her. As many women have done, she kept on going even after the loss of the one who was her soul mate, her husband and best friend - for she probably felt particular responsibility for her sons in this foreign land. At least with them about there was hope and that hope shone bright when they both married Moabite women. Now for the first time in a long time, things seem to be taking a turn for the better and Naomi could hope for grandchildren; now there was the prospect of descendants to continue the family line and name. Perhaps Naomi had hope, joy, a glimmer of light on the horizon that the Lord had not forsaken them. We get cycles in our lives of good things and bad things, when there are times to rejoice and times to weep. Sometimes we feel in the happy times that we are being set up for another fall and that God, fate or chance are about to play another cruel trick on us! It would seem so with Naomi as we see:

5. Naomi's Sons Died (v5)

They had been in the land for some 10 years and both of them died. She must have been devastated; she had gone from being a wife to a widow, from a mother to a completely bereaved wife and mother, surrounded by family to being a woman alone in a man's world. In v5 she's not even given her name - the NIV inserts it, the Hebrew says *'the woman was left'*, emphasising she was a woman alone in a man's world. My great-grandmother on my mother's side was known as a very sour and bitter woman, in researching the family tree I saw the reasons for this - her husband died at a young age, she lost other children at young ages, the eldest son was killed in an horrific mining accident in 1913 and she has just one remaining son, my grandfather – who faced WW1 and survived unhurt. Naomi is being hit by dark providence after dark providence and the family name is on the brink of extinction.

From what I've said already this is not bad luck, chance, fate or misfortune but all this is coming from the hand of the Sovereign Lord. Naomi owns this in v20-21 and she is bitter against Him and His ways. Why did God do this? Was it because, as some say, it was a sin to leave the Promised Land and their sons married Moabite women? No - that's a very superficial understanding for we see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all left the Promised Land and were blessed! The writer doesn't assign guilt as the reason for God's actions towards them. Strange thing is that Paul had a thorn in the flesh and it was specifically sent of God as a blessing - something that health, wealth and prosperity teachers struggle to deal with! No doubt Naomi would have searched her heart for any reason why this had come upon them and it must have grieved her even more when she could not find any. Dark providences are harder to bear when we cannot find a reason for them, or understand why and they cause our questioning to be more intense and anguished.

6. Making Sense Of Dark Providences

What are we to do when dark providences from God come across our lives? What can help us to make sense of them? We are to remember two things:

a. Our God Is Unfailingly Good - we can see of this in this book. We will see joyful providences in the closing paragraph which are contrasts to this opening paragraph – we will see in both paragraphs the families that were there in Bethlehem and we know the latter family goes on to greatness and points us to another who was born in Bethlehem. Then in v5 when it speaks of her sons, an unusual word is used for the word ‘sons’, a totally different word to that used in v1. It has a sense of her little ones, her babies, her darling ones. You may say so what, but the same word is used in the last paragraph of the book in 4:16 as she takes her new little one, the baby, her new darling one and has him on her lap. The 1st readers would have made the connection! She lost them but now she has him. God would be proved unfailingly good.

Some question if there's any significance about chronological note of 10 years, saying that if couples remained childless 10 years then the husbands could divorce their wives! Sarah gave Hagar her maid to Abraham after they had been in the land 10 years and couldn't have children. There may or may not be something in this, but it is interesting to note that in the last paragraph is a list of 10 different names given to us and some question if God is reminding everyone of His goodness as He compensates for those 10 years.

We can speculate as we look at this complete story, but so often we rarely know why things have occurred in our lives, but by remembering that God is unfailingly good, we can rest in Him and quietly commit our ways into His loving care. As dark providences come into and across our lives then:

b. Realise How to Interpret Dark Providences - they must always be interpreted through the lens of the cross of Jesus Christ. The Lord

Jesus was suspended between heaven and earth and as He did so, He endured the darkest providence ever experienced by a human being and He asked why - "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" We read earlier that He was crucified by the predetermined will of God (Acts 2:23). Why would God do this to His beloved Son? Three days later the answer came that the darkest providence had purpose, intention and was filled with design. Why did God forsake His Son? It was for you and for me, to save us and to rescue us from our sin and its consequences.

We are to interpret dark providences in our lives through the cross of Christ, to realise they come from God and are always filled with purpose and will result in His glory and ultimately our good – even if we cannot see that immediately, if ever this side of heaven! Hopefully we can pick up on this in the book of Ruth - not as an academic exercise, but we need to think about it, pray about it and apply the truths we learn to our own life situations now and for the future.

We will be reminded of some of the attributes and characteristics of our great God as they are highlighted in this historical narrative, and these are designed to increase our faith, to deepen our trust and stir up our love for this great sovereign God and so what we cannot understand should prompt us to adore and worship Him in wonder as we go on with Him.