

INTRODUCTION

Eighteen months ago a friend of ours in N. Ireland died suddenly at the age of 40. He was at Bible College studying to be a missionary. He came home from college one day complaining of pains in his chest. He and his wife drove the 10 miles to their doctor's surgery and when they got there Lynne stayed in the waiting room while Ricky went in to see the doctor. After a short time Lynne was sent for and told that Ricky had taken a massive heart attack while being examined by the doctor and sadly had died.

Lynne no doubt waited in the waiting room expecting to see Ricky in a few moments instead she never saw him alive again. What can you say to someone in that situation? Ricky left behind two children the same age as Jason and Sarah. Strangely the book of Ruth has much to say to people like Lynne and her family. It has much to say to us as well for it is all about God's providence in life. Providence is a very old fashion word but it is a theological term that we use for God ruling all the affairs in our world for his own purposes.

Somehow or other the sudden and tragic death of Ricky fulfilled God's purposes within this world. I don't yet understand how and I'm sure Lynne doesn't either but being a Christian means that we can have absolute confidence that all that happens to us and all that happens in this world is ordered by the Lord to fulfil his purposes. That is the main message that I want us to learn from our studies in the book of Ruth.

1. THE TIME WHEN RUTH LIVED (v 1)

We are told that Ruth lived at a very different time period from us. She lived during the time of the Judges. However Ruth was not one of God's people she was from Moab a pagan nation who were enemies of the people of God. However Ruth's future husband lived in Canaan during this difficult period known as the time of the judges. If you know your Old Testament history you will know that the Israelites were slaves in Egypt and then God delivered them.

He took them into a period of wandering through the desert for 40 years. During this time the people know the heavy hand of the Lord upon them (1 Corinthians 10:1-10). After this period of wandering they entered into the Promised Land the land described as flowing with Milk and Honey. However they had to conquer the land and this was a period of much conflict. Then we have the division of the land and this led to the establishment of tribes in various parts of the land which, led to what is known as a confederation of tribes, a very loose unity between the tribes. It was during this period that God sent various Judges to deliver God's people from their enemies these enemies came as a result of the sin of the people during this period. The people followed the same cycle during this whole period in the history of God's people. First they rebelled and sinned against the Lord. Then God judged them and as a result they repented and God sent a deliverer (Judge) to rescue the people and then they were restored but soon they fell into sin and the whole cycle began again.

The period of Judges is summarised for us in Judges 21:25, because the people had no king, no leader then everyone did what was right in their own eyes; a title that can be used to describe so many so called churches today. These were dark days for the people of God, days when true religion was rare and when sin was rampant.

But the book of Ruth tells us that even in dark days God has his people and is working his providence out through individuals. There is an application here for us isn't there. We too live in

dark days as far as gospel work is concerned. It seems that in many areas of Britain today true faith in God is unknown. It seems that the churches have completely ignored God's word and are doing what is right in their own eyes. Even those churches that are remaining faithful to the word of God are often small and insignificant compared to the masses within their town or city. But we must never forget this truth that God is working his providence out and that providence involves individuals and families for remember it is through the line of Ruth that our Saviour the Lord Jesus comes. Through apparently an insignificant family who as we will see experienced incredibly hard times God brings about the Saviour of the world.

Therefore no believer or no true church should see itself as insignificant. We might be insignificant to the world but not to God and God is working out his providence for his own purposes that are invisible to us but not to God. Who knows what God's purposes are for establishing his church here in the Dales and for bringing this church into this building? We don't know but perhaps in 10 or 20 or 50 years time someone will be able to see how God was working out his purposes in Scotton and then in Leyburn.

We need to learn that even in the darkest of days God is working out his purposes through the various providences of life. It is God who is in control of all that happens within our world today.

2. THE PROBLEM THE PEOPLE FACED (v 1)

We read that there was a famine in the land (v 1). We are not told why there was a famine in the land. Was this a judgement from God for after all the land of Canaan was described as a land flowing with milk and honey a land of plenty. But it now has a famine. Even in Bethlehem, which means the house of bread, there is a famine. Bethlehem was a very futile region yet there is a famine; is God bringing upon his people a judgement because of their sin and rebellion during this period of the Judges.

It could well be that what is experienced came upon the people during the period that we read about in Judges 6:1-6. The Midianites ravaged their country, they ruined their crops killed their animals and improvised the land. The Midianites may have caused this famine but behind all that is going on is the directing hand of God. He caused the Midianites to attack the land and ravage it and he is doing so for his own purposes but it has caused a real problem to the people.

Our text focuses upon just one family that is the family of Elimelech. What should he and his family do? Well this is God's land God promised it to his people he has led the people through the wilderness and he had helped them conquer and become established in the land. It seems logical that Elimelech should stay repent of his sin and trust his God to provide. After all, his name means the Lord is King well if that is really true could the King not provide for those under his rule? Well Elimelech decided that the best thing to do is to leave the Promised Land and God's land and go to Moab. The people of Moab were pagans they worshipped the god 'Chemosh' and they believed that their God was responsible for providing the crops for the land.

It was a debased religion with the use of cult prostitutes at their shrines in order to encourage their gods to produce crops for the land. Elimelech decides to leave God's people and God's land and go and live in pagan Moab, who of course traditionally were the enemies of God's people Israel. What made him and his family do such a thing? His situation was really difficult, famine would eventually destroy him and his family, and therefore he feels he needs to take action to solve the problem.

But in doing so he was I believe disobeying God he was putting himself in a situation where abandonment of his faith was a very real possibility. How would his children marry Israelite girls if

he were going to live in Moab? Well if these questions were on his mind he seems to ignore them. Perhaps he thought he would only be in Moab for a short time and then he would return but sadly he would never return and his dear wife Naomi would be there for 10 years. But again there is a lesson for us here. Before we criticise Elimelech how often have we done something that we ought not to have done because of the difficult situation we find ourselves in. Here is a Christian man who has just become unemployed. He has a family to keep and as the weeks pass the pressure mounts. He has sought to find a Job according to the biblical principles that he believes in but it seems that his situation is getting worst.

Then one day a neighbour comes to him and asks him if he would like to work in his friends Pub. The Christian felt very uncomfortable about it but thought to himself that it would only be for a short time anyway, he would do it until he found something else. On top of this the job involved working evenings and all day Sunday. He knew that he would not get to church much but still he decided that it was a job and he needed the money and besides the Lord would understand.

He took the job and eventually he abandoned his faith. You see when under pressure caused by the difficult circumstances of life we can so easily reason like those in the world instead of trusting our God who is King to meet our needs. We need to be careful that we do not let circumstances of life dictate our actions instead of the word of God. That is the temptation that we all face and that is the temptation that we must all resist otherwise we too will be in danger of abandoning our faith. But the other lesson for us is that God is working out his purposes even through the clear disobedience of Elimelech. God is not causing Elimelech to go to Moab but going to Moab is all part of God's purposes and he is directing everything behind the scenes. God wants to save Ruth and bring her into the people of God and into the line of David and he is going to do that through Elimelech's family yet none of this excuses Elimelech's actions.

The providence of God is strange indeed; He does not cause sin or lead us to sin yet he uses it for the fulfilment of his purposes. We need this confidence in our modern world. We need to know that God is in control that he is directing all the affairs of men and he is intimately involved in directing all that happens to us even using our sin, which we freely commit to accomplish his own purposes in our world. It's difficult to understand and grasp yet it is absolutely true.

3. TRADEGY STRIKES (vs. 2-5).

Over time Elimelech's two sons marry two Moabite women, one is called Orpah and the other Ruth. They were pagan women; they clearly should not have married them (Deuteronomy 7:2-2) but one step of disobedience leads to another. But no matter how disobedient this family is; our heart must go out to them when we think what happens next. There's something within us that says they didn't deserve this to happen to them. Elimelech dies and eventually so do his two sons Mahlon and Killion. This means that Naomi, Orpah and Ruth are left without any means of support whatsoever. Their future is bleak indeed; perhaps Naomi asked the question 'Lord what are you doing in all this?'

She is now left desolate in a strange land with no one to care for her and no one who she could join in the worship of God not even her two daughters can worship with her. What is God doing? Well we will have to wait until next time before we see this more fully but let me just show you something of what God is doing. First he is bringing Ruth into the community of the people of God he is reaching out in love to a Gentile like Ruth.

He is showing his great compassion for sinners like Ruth and secondly he is bringing Naomi back to where she should be, back to God, back to his people and back to the land (v 6). This is how God's providence works, all that is happening in these few verses is happening at the direction of

God's hand and he is using and directing every situation for his own purposes. Without excusing Elimelech's sin of disobedience, God uses and directs the whole situation in order to save Ruth and bring her into his family and into the line of David (4:22). Consequently Jesus would come from this line a line, which contained both Jews and Gentiles a line that shows that Jesus has come into the world to save both Jews and Gentiles. He allowed all this to happen to Naomi in order to bring her back to God and his people and his land.

When tragedy strikes then we have to accept that it is all part and parcel of God's will for us we need to learn to trust our Lord and learn that although his providences can be strange indeed his purposes are ultimately always for our good and for his glory. In this case tragedy drove Naomi back to God back to where she ought to have been back and to the land that she ought never to have left. Sometimes in our own lives God brings tragedy in order to get us back to God and back to the place where we ought to be.

Let us during this week look at the various events that happen to us and take place in this world with a different set of eyes. Look beyond what we can physically see and in faith look at the hand of God directing everything and I mean everything that is taking place. Perhaps next week you will tell me how God's has been working out his purposes in your life over this next week through his various and sometimes strange providences.

Amen